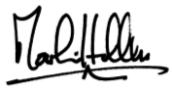
WILTS & BERKS CANAL TRUST

PATRON: HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN

Restoring 70 miles of canal and towpath
for the benefit of local communities, wildlife and leisure

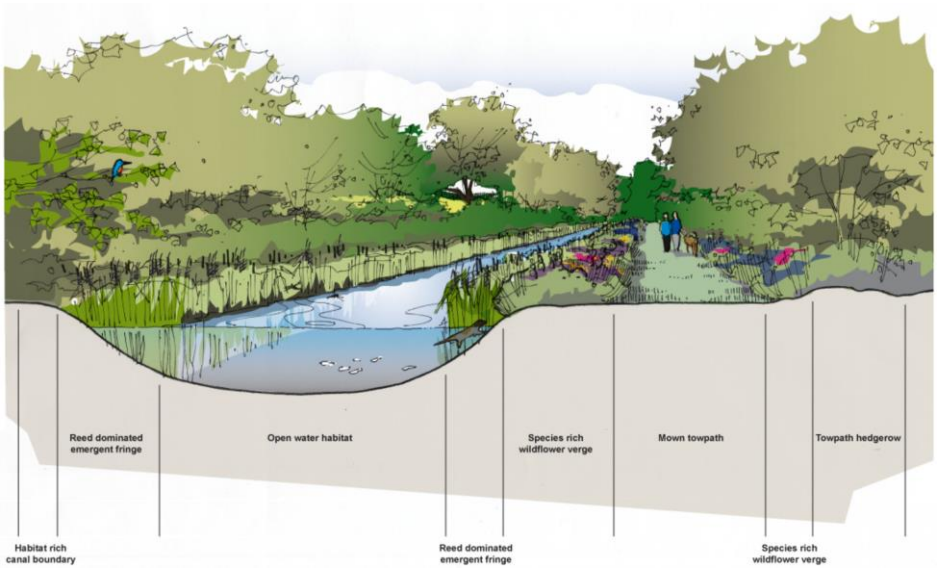
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Revision History		
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Draft 1.0	Draft for review - MH, GO, DM, HY	16 April 2024
Draft 2.0	Draft for review - Directors and Dave Cook (Env and Sustainability Advisor)	7 May 2024
Draft 3.0	Draft for review - Senior leadership team	20 May 2024
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Version 1	Approved	4 July 2024
V1.1	Addition of Poisonous Plants	17 July 2024

Policy Background

The Wilts & Berks Canal Trust is a volunteer led organisation promoting and carrying out restoration of the abandoned Wilts & Berks Canal in Wiltshire Swindon and Oxfordshire The 112Km long former waterway's current environmental and ecological status was assessed by the Trust's Biodiversity Framework with the aim of understanding how current habitats can be transformed in to the unique habitat of an operational canal. These initiatives encompass habitat restoration, water quality improvement, biodiversity enhancement, and sustainable ecosystem management, while protecting or mitigating important habitats created by the derelict waterway
Fig 1 illustrates a typical restored section of canal



The Trust engages in activities such as, towpath stabilization, wildlife conservation, hedgerow renovation, tree planting, woodland management and creating wildflower meadows creating habitats for wildlife to thrive. These contribute to the restoration and sustainability of the ecosystem within the canal and its banks, together with the habitats in the areas adjacent to the canal channel.

Our Charitable Objectives commit us to look after and improve the natural environment of our canals now and in the future. By implementing this policy, we ensure that our stewardship of the environment is evident in our major projects and volunteer work parties.

The Trust is mindful of the complex range of Legislative regulation, including the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, the recently enacted Environment Act 2021, and the Town & Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2011 as well as a number of other regulations. This policy is written to ensure that the Trust's procedures, plans and activities comply with the legislation.

Pillars of this Policy
This Policy covers our approach to the natural environment of the waterway corridor (canal, towpath and offside) including water, habitats, wildlife and issues that affect people's enjoyment of the waterway and associated legislation. This policy is based on 5 pillars:

1) **BIODIVERSITY:** Enhance the biodiversity along the canal route and any associated habitats in land that the trust manages.

2) **SUSTAINABILITY:** Improve the sustainability of our operations.

3) **LEGISLATION:** Ensure that our projects comply with the requirements of all relevant legislation including the 2021 Environment Act.

4) **PUBLIC ACCESS:** Ensure that the public have access to the canal to learn about and understand the natural habitats of the blue green corridor.

5) **FUTURE CAPABILITY:** Grow the Trust's future capability to assess, manage and improve the environment.

Strategies used to deliver against this Policy and its defined Pillars.
Each of the five Pillars contain several different strategies the Trust might employ to achieve the policy. The actual strategies and plans that are adopted in the Trust's annual objectives will depend on the human and financial resources available to the Board.

Policy and plan review
Every 5 years, the Trust will update this policy and its associated Pillars/Strategies.
This Policy should inform the preparation of annual plans, with specific objectives and activities defined to enhance the environmental credentials of the Trust.

Strategies to deliver against each Pillar

Pillar 1: Enhance the biodiversity along the canal route and any associated habitats in land that the trust manages.

Our plans for each section of the canal depend on the current condition of natural habitats, whilst enhancing biodiversity along a canal route involves creating new habitats, promoting native species, and minimising human impact. Here are some of the strategies that we will adopt:

a) **Planting Native Vegetation:** The Trust aims to plant native species along the canal banks to provide food and shelter for local wildlife.

b) **Creation of Habitat Features:** The offside bank will be retained and designated as a diverse blue/green habitat not normally affected by people using the towpath or boats. Where possible, our policy is to install bird boxes, bat houses, and insect hotels to attract a variety of species. We will support initiatives such as the 'Local Nature recovery programme' to focus our work, in collaboration with the relevant authorities.

c) **Reducing waste ground:** Many of the sites that the Trust manages are brownfield sites including land previously used as waste ground or tips. The Trust aims to continue to use such land wherever possible. Depending on resources, waste monitoring may also take place.

d) **Managing pollution:** Many of the sites that the Trust manages were previously used as waste ground or tips. The Trust aims to implement measures to clear and recycle rubbish.

e) **Maintaining Water Quality:** We aim to ensure that the water quality of the canal is suitable for aquatic life by preventing contamination and promoting natural filtration methods such as reed beds.

f) **Stable and wildlife-friendly canal banks:** Long-term canal bank erosion can seriously damage both the use of our canal and towpath and the habitat needed by wildlife. Wherever possible we will avoid using concrete or solid piling, in favour of natural solutions such as coir matting, hazel wattles and rolls of brush wood, with stone filled gabions when required.

g) **Managing Non-native Invasive Species:** Habitats and native species can be destroyed or put at risk by plant and animal species that are not native to the UK (e.g. Japanese knotweed, mink). The trust will work under advice from wildlife organisations, canal authorities (e.g. Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust BBOWT, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, CRT or IWA) or statutory authorities to control or completely eradicate non-native, invasive species.

h) **Managing Poisonous Plants:** To avoid damaging the habitat of beneficial plants such as foxgloves, poisonous plants (especially those which are native to the UK) should only be removed or controlled as part of normal habitat work, not simply because they are 'poisonous'. Appropriate control/management techniques and PPE should be used for poisonous plants, to ensure that their locality is safe for Trust volunteers and visitors. The Trust will work under advice from wildlife organisations, canal authorities (e.g. Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust BBOWT, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, CRT or IWA) or statutory authorities to control and manage poisonous plants appropriately.

i) **Establishing Wildlife Corridors:** The WBCT SSSI survey in 2017 found around 1900 sites of special interest within 1km of the canal route. The work of the Trust establishes blue green corridors to connect these sites allowing wildlife to move freely and access different habitats.



Heron at Royal Wootten Bassett

j) **Monitor and Adapt:** The trust will regularly monitor biodiversity along the canal route and adjust management practices as needed to support a healthy ecosystem including:

- A desk top assessment of the biodiversity along the canal and associated land every 5 years.
- A record of the freshwater lengths along the canal maintained by the Trust.
- An assessment of any site of special interest using audio or camera capture technology

Example:

In 2024, the Bee Route comprises 12.5 acres of towpath, meadow and banking to develop wildflowers and other flora and fauna. The primary site in Naish hill has been used to increase biodiversity, planting seeds grown at a National Trust SSSI to expand local species of wildflower.



Wildlife team at Naish Hill

Pillar 2: Improve the sustainability of our operations.

Improving the sustainability of canal operations involves minimising environmental impacts, conserving resources, and promoting efficiency. Here are some of the strategies that we will adopt:

a) **Reducing Energy Consumption:** Implementing energy-efficient practices where suitable such as using solar-powered equipment, battery operated equipment, encouraging hydroelectric schemes, optimising pump systems and minimising unnecessary lighting.

b) **Conserving Water:** We aim to employ water-saving measures such as water-efficient locks and gates, reducing water leakage and implementing water recycling systems such as back pumping. We aim to design stretches of canal as routes for water run-off and for use as flood mitigation.

c) **Reducing Emissions:** We will transition to cleaner fuels for boats and machinery and will adopt emission reduction technologies such as catalytic converters and particulate filters. The Trust will look to attract funding for these changes in technology.

d) **Management of Waste:** The Trust ensures that we have waste management systems to reduce, reuse, and recycle materials used in canal operations, and to ensure the correct disposal of hazardous waste.

e) **Future use**: As the Trust grows further policies and procedures will be developed to improve sustainability.

Example:

In the Melksham Link project, special consideration has been given to the set-up of a hydroelectric scheme in parallel to the lock on the river Avon in the canalised section of the river Avon.



Site of proposed Hydroelectric scheme, Melksham

Pillar 3: Ensure that our projects comply with the requirements of all relevant legislation including the 2021 Environment Act.

All UK canal restoration projects must comply with the 2021 Environment Act by prioritising environmental protection and sustainability throughout all stages of planning, implementation, and operation. The goals of the Act are to protect and enhance the natural environment for present and future generations. Here are some of the strategies that we will incorporate into our major construction projects:

a) **Environmental Assessment**: The Trust will investigate how to develop a baseline environmental assessment of the canal, in sections or as a whole. The aim of is to be able to fully assess ecological and habitat changes aiming to understand the long term changes and potential benefit of the restoration project.

b) **Establishing Mitigation Measures**: The trust will implement mitigation measures to minimise adverse environmental effects identified in the EIA. This may include habitat restoration, pollution prevention measures, and minimising disruption to ecosystems. We work with local planning authorities and the Environment Agency to ensure compliance.

c) **Biodiversity Conservation:** We aim to promote biodiversity conservation by preserving and enhancing habitats along the canal route. On our main sites, this involves planting native vegetation, creating wildlife corridors, and protecting endangered species.

d) **Climate Change Resilience:** As part of Major Project Planning (MPP), the Trust will consider climate change and incorporate adaptation measures where necessary. This may involve designing infrastructure to withstand extreme weather events, managing water resources more efficiently, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The Trust will actively consider partner projects such as solar farms and hydroelectric schemes.

e) **Stakeholder Engagement:** The Trust engages regularly with stakeholders, including local communities, environmental organisations, and government agencies. We aim to gather input and address concerns related to environmental protection and sustainability.

f) **Compliance with Regulations:** Through our planning and EIA process, we will ensure compliance with relevant environmental regulations and standards, including those set forth in the 2021 Environment Act and other applicable laws. Mitigation and monitoring must achieve the minimum requirements such as a 10% increase in Biodiversity Net Gain within any development area.

g) **Monitoring and Reporting:** Major projects are regularly reviewed in dedicated project meetings and the MPP committee takes an overview of the progress of all Trust projects. Our project process aims to establish a monitoring framework to track environmental performance throughout the project lifecycle. This includes monitoring key indicators such as water quality, biodiversity, and carbon emissions, and reporting findings to relevant authorities and stakeholders.

Pillar 4: Ensure that the public have access to the canal to learn about and understand the natural habitats of the blue-green corridor.

Increasing awareness of the Trust's environmental activities will hopefully ensure that local communities will support and wish to preserve the canal's natural environment. Our policy to increase awareness includes engagement, hands-on experiences and information. Here are some of the strategies that we will adopt:

a) **Signage:** The Trust will install information boards at key locations to provide information about heritage, local flora, fauna, and ecological processes. We aim to make the signage visually appealing and easy to understand for all ages.

b) **Nature Walks and Events**: The trust will organise walks and leaflets about the route, to bring communities closer to their natural environment.



Walkers at Shrivenham Canal Park

c) **Community monitoring:** The Trust will engage the public in science initiatives such as surveys, habitat mapping, and water quality monitoring.

d) **Green Spaces:** Where the Trust has access to community spaces, we will develop not only linear towpaths but circular routes, green spaces and canal paths. We want people to connect with nature and learn about local plants and wildlife. We will also encourage the community to participate in conservation activities such as native planting along the Bee Route.

e) **Education Programmes:** The Trust will collaborate with schools and uniform groups to develop programmes that teach students about local natural habitats and inspire them to become stewards of the environment.

f) **Use of social media:** Our social media channels regularly report on the environmental and conservation projects undertaken by the Trust's volunteers. We will use interactive maps, virtual tours, and educational videos to provide information about local natural habitats and conservation efforts.

Pillar 5: Grow the Trust's capability to assess, manage and improve the environment.

To grow its environmental capability, WBCT wishes to develop several proactive steps. Here are some of the strategies that we will adopt:

a) **Environmental Hub ('e-hub')**: The e-hub will coordinate environmental policy and management throughout the Trust:

- Support the volunteer work and major projects with best practice info.
- Gather data and case studies on environmental and biodiversity effects for the calculation of Biodiversity Net Gain and other measures.
- Preparation of the biodiversity and environmental conservation policy and strategy.

The e-hub will be chaired by an Executive Director and be supported by members of the Trust's branches and functions.

b) **Partnerships and Collaborations**: The Trust will continue to develop its partner relationships to include county and town councils, conservation organisations, wildlife organisations, government agencies, businesses, community groups and landowners. Through these partnerships, we leverage resources and reach a wider audience. Collaboration on joint initiatives such as habitat restoration projects, environmental education campaigns, and volunteer opportunities will strengthen the Trust's capability to deliver environmental projects and ensure future sustainability.

c) **Specialist capability:** Through these partnerships and collaborations, the Trust will access specialist expertise, resources, and funding for environmental projects and initiatives.

d) **Hiring environmental experts:** For major construction or restoration projects, the Trust will hire environmental specialists or consultants to advise on environmental matters, forecast environmental impacts, develop strategies, and oversee implementation of environmental programmes.



Nonsuch trip boat at Templars Firs