

Case Study

Arun and Rother Connections (ARC)

Background

The River Rother runs west to east through the South Downs National Park joining the River Arun near Pulborough. Together, the rivers link woodland, wetland and farmland, including nationally and internationally important wildlife sites.

Man-made interventions have changed the natural characteristics of rivers and wetlands limiting habitat quality and reducing the diversity of wildlife. For example, it is thought that the Sussex water vole population has declined by over 98% in 30 years.

The main causes of these problems are:

- Water pollution: waste water from sewage treatment works and run-off from rural and urban areas increase nitrate and phosphate levels.
- Invasive non-native species; these threaten wildlife, food production and can increase flood risk.
- Modification of natural water courses to support agriculture, industry, navigation, abstraction, recreation and flood protection.

Arun and Rother Connections (ARC) was a landscape-scale project delivered by a partnership of seven organisations working alongside local communities. It aimed to promote a thriving river system in the Arun and Rother river catchment across a 77,000 hectare project area.



Restoring Storrington Meadows chalk stream

The project

The ARC work programme, 2013 to 2016, was led by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The £2.2m project (£1.1m provided by the HLF) consisted of around 50 sub-projects that aimed to conserve and restore the channels and waterside habitats of the chosen catchment area. These included:

- Major works to improve fish passage
- Upper Arun river restoration project
- Habitat improvements (approximately 240 hectares)
- Wetland habitat restoration
- Surveys and removal of non-native invasive plant species
- Activities to engage people to help them to get to know their river
- Wetlands education programme (64 primary schools in the project area)
- Access and visitor improvements at three nature reserves
- New interpretation, trails and signage
- Landowner training and engagement
- Volunteering programme

Further details regarding the project, including a short film, can be found here: arunwesternstreams.org.uk/projects/arc

The full list of partners included the RSPB, Natural England, the Arun and Rother Rivers Trust, West Sussex County Council, the Environment Agency, the Sussex Wildlife Trust, and the South Downs National Park Authority.

“Arun and Rother Connections was an inspirational project that engaged the imaginations of numerous people. Its legacy lives on!

Steve Gilbert, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

The outcome

There were, and continue to be, many successful outcomes of the ARC project.

Large areas of wetland habitats, rivers and ponds were restored or created allowing wildlife to successfully thrive. A programme of invasive non-native species control was undertaken as well as capital works, including the removal and/or bypassing of five weirs to facilitate fish and eel passage. In 2014, the Environment Agency recorded 1,826 elvers (young eels) using the ARC eel pass to swim upstream at Hardham Weir, a site that was previously considered to be amongst the top 30 obstructions to fish passage in the South of England.

Community engagement was also a success. Through a variety of events the project directly engaged 2,391 adults in a range of ways.

119 volunteers also contributed 1,990 days, or 5.45 years, of their time to the project. Concerted efforts were made to engage people from all backgrounds, resulting in stronger, more connected communities tackling local issues.

ARC project delivery was based on a solid foundation of existing data and evidence as well as newly conducted surveys. A Habitat Potential Model, combining data from a vast range of sources, was developed to identify areas where wetland habitat restoration would be most effective.

The future

Data and evidence have strongly influenced both the project's development and delivery. The Habitat Potential Model and Ecosystem Services mapping tool have proven to be valuable for project partners and other decision-makers regionally. The latter has enabled the South Downs National Park to adopt an Ecosystem Services approach in the development of its Local Plan, the first time this approach has been adopted by a UK National Park.

southdowns.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/national-park-local-plan

With over a thousand volunteers trained, many are committed to tackling issues such as non-native invasive species, localised flooding and water quality through local initiatives such as the Arun and Rother Riverfly scheme.

arrt.org.uk/rother-riverfly-scheme

The ARC partners continue to work together through membership of the Arun & Western Streams Catchment partnership, committed to future improvement of the Arun & Rother river system.

For more information, please contact:

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The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan

The ARC project was consistent with the following outcomes in the South Downs Partnership Management Plan:

2. There is increased capacity within the landscape for its natural resources, habitats & species to adapt to climate change & other pressures.
3. A well-managed and better connected network of habitats & increased population and distribution of priority species now exist in the National Park
6. There is widespread understanding of the special qualities of the National Park & the benefits they provide.
8. More responsibility and action is taken by visitors, residents & businesses to conserve & enhance the special qualities & use resources more wisely.