

Grass Roots Conservation Group

Annual Report

Financial Year: 1 April 2023 - 31 March 2024



Wood ear fungus – Red's Wood November 2023

Grassroots

CONSERVATION GROUP

Charity No: NIC 102932

Introduction – Purposes

Grass Roots Conservation Group ('Grass Roots') is a charity registered with the NI Charity Commissioners, number NIC102932. The public address is: 11 Wynchurch Avenue, Belfast BT6 0JP

The Purpose of the Group (as registered with the Charity Commissioners) is to benefit the general public through the conservation, protection and enhancement of the environment on the island of Ireland.

Grass Roots is governed by the Constitution as last amended on 10 October 2015, which is available from the Secretary. The Trustees of Grass Roots during the Financial Year 2022-23 were:

Dr. Anne Hardcastle (Chair)
Mr. Clive Harvey (Treasurer)
Ms. Pauline White (Membership Secretary)
Mr. Sam Hastings
Ms. Janis Lunn
Mr. Ken Orr (Secretary)
Mr. Robert Shearman (Task Organiser)
Ms. Nicola Paul

Secretary's Report on Activities and Achievements

The period between April 2023 and March 2024 saw a packed programme of events, with a record breaking 27 days of work scheduled, though 4 days were cancelled for reasons such as flooding, or the illness of the landowner. Volunteer numbers were good, in keeping with recent pre-pandemic levels.



Figure 1 Walling in Inishowen – August 2023

As always, a varied programme included familiar sites such as Saintfield Estate and Rea's Wood at Antrim, occasional sites like Oxford Island and the Bog Meadows, and new ones such as the former Ecos centre near Ballymena and Castlewellan Forest. October Wood, Carryduff, has become a real favourite and our thanks again go to Alexey Janes for providing several days' work in the woodland and hosting our established Christmas Decorations workshop. We had a three day trip to Inishowen to continue work on the drystone wall at

the White's cottage; once again we had remarkably good weather and greatly appreciate the opportunity to stay in such a beautiful location.



Figure 2 Ideal work for Duke of Edinburgh participants - making the entrance ramp (above) for the composting toilet at October Wood, and planting trees at the Mehargs' farm



As another established regular task, we had an August day of seed collection along with Debbie Gillies of True Harvest Seeds, but this time we started at their Centre near Ballyhornan. We had a fascinating morning touring the site and hearing of the ambitious development plans, and then focussed on seed collection in the afternoon at Ardtole Nature Reserve, just a little way along the coast.

Figure 3 Seed collection at True Harvest

2023 was a special year for the Marine Conservation Society, celebrating 30 years of the BeachWatch survey and litter collection. Grass Roots Conservation Group was given a special Award for having participated in more Beachwatch days than any other group in the UK – we have amassed 29 years, only missing the first year which had not been widely publicised. Ken Orr (Secretary) was invited to give an (on-line) presentation about our work at the national MCS AGM in November 2023, which helped to raise our profile still further.



Figure 4 Pond construction at October Wood: never happier than when we are working in a muddy hole.

As well as several days' work (and hospitality) at their farm and woodland and at Tolan's Point, Michael and Judy Meharg came up with a task that was new to Grass Roots, making faggots of tree hay at the former Ecos centre. These are basically bundles of cut branches of species such as willow and birch that are subsequently dried and used as cattle fodder through the winter. This provides highly nutritious feed, and the (indoor) cows love to strip the leaves from the branches.



Figure 5 Making tree hay at the former Ecos centre

We also enjoyed outings to Brackagh Moss for scrub clearance work and to Oxford Island for Himalayan balsam bashing for Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon council. A visit to the TCV tree nursery at Cultra showed the potential of the site, though there are also difficulties in the form of rabbits and a very wet field. We were back at the Ballynature Show in Ballynure in March 2024; it's always a good networking opportunity, as well as generating interest in our work at the stand.

The Summer outing went to Enniskillen this year, with visits to the Castle and nearby Florencecourt. After a walk around the Marina, we finished with a very enjoyable meal at a local hostelry. It's a good opportunity just to relax in each other's company rather than always being focussed on-task.



Figure 6 Choosing a new boat at Enniskillen Marina

Governance

There were few developments in the governance of the group this year. Apart from some minor updating and revisions to Risk Assessments, we revamped our Consent Forms to better target just the information we really need, and introduced an Emergency Contact list to condense the essential details required for every task, along with a sign-in sheet to be used at the start of each day.

Private benefit to individuals continued to arise in ways that are incidental and necessary to ensure that benefit is provided to the general public. Private benefit to trustees and volunteers in the form of reimbursement of expenses was limited to only those expenses actually incurred in carrying out conservation activities. Any private benefit arising from social activities was judged necessary to contribute to team building. Private benefit to individuals, who own land where Grass Roots work, was judged to be proportionate to the public benefit resulting from the group's activities.

The Trustees of Grass Roots Conservation Group have taken due regard to the Commission's public benefit guidance when exercising any powers or duties to which the guidance is relevant.



Figure 7 Snowdrops in the woods at Saintfield House

Trustees' Review of Financial position

In compliance with the guidance issued by the Charity Commissioners, our Accounts have been examined by an Independent Examiner. No funds held by Grass Roots Conservation Group are materially in deficit.

Overall expenditure almost exactly balanced income for the year, and reserves continue to be very healthy. The cash held on deposit is sufficient to provide security for any adverse circumstances likely to arise.

Thanks are due to our Treasurer, Mr. Clive Harvey, for his usual very thorough job on preparing the accounts, and to our Independent Assessor Mrs. Marjorie Guiler.

Dr. A. Hardcastle (Chair) date: