

▼ Woodland craft | Heather Hunt



A world-wide wood

Working with asylum seekers and refugees at Newfield Spring Wood has been enriching and humbling, reports custodian **Heather Hunt**

“My mother told me to wave at the planes so I wouldn’t grow up being afraid,” Firas, an asylum seeker from Iraq, shared with me at lunch around a fire during a shelter building day. Firas was six at the beginning of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war in 1980.

“There have been US planes ever since. War is so destructive and has such a terrible impact on children.”

Firas is one of around 30 asylum seekers and refugees who have been part of a partnership project engaging asylum seekers and refugees in conservation and activity days with our Friends of Newfield Spring Wood.

The wood, in northeast Derbyshire, lies four miles from Sheffield city centre. We sought to connect with a project called New Beginnings that

helps asylum seekers and refugees access opportunities in Sheffield. The project recruited the asylum seekers and paid for their bus fares to a stop 15 minutes’ drive away from the woods, where we picked them up.

Developing skills

As partners, we recognised the restricted lives of asylum seekers and the value of being in nature for wellbeing. We also wanted to enable interested asylum seekers to develop skills and leadership qualities that could lead to committed volunteering with an environmental or conservation organisation, often a necessary precursor to employment in the sector.

Our programme, “Understanding

and managing woodland for people and nature,” engages asylum seekers alongside our regular volunteers, the Friends of Newfield Spring Wood. Seven out of 15 days per year were in collaboration with Don Catchment Rivers Trust (DCRT) delivering Natural Flood Management (NFM).

After 15 months of the partnership, we found the stressful and unpredictable nature of asylum seekers’ lives meant erratic attendance for conservation days and difficulty with continuity. Only Tefe-Ngack, an asylum seeker from Cameroon, maintained any degree of continuity. I first met Tefe-Ngack on a NFM day in October 2022. With a masters in Ecology and Conservation and another in Project Management while in Cameroon, he had been

responsible for a youth conservation project across the Congo basin. Tefe-Ngack carried heavy logs and skilfully laid out the dam, undaunted by the lashing rain. He became such an enthusiastic volunteer, whatever the weather, that we named one of the dams after him.

Tefe-Ngack was passionate about environmental conservation and keen to work in this sector in the UK and contribute to the sustainable management of biodiversity and water resources in Africa. His ability to maintain continuity with our project was interrupted by the Home Office abruptly moving him to Huddersfield, in June. In November 2023, he was delighted to tell us his asylum claim had been accepted, 18 months after applying.

Issam’s ID card entitled him to work in certain occupations but did not give him refugee status. He was involved with a group called Time to Be Out, for gay and lesbian asylum seekers, and together we organised another Nature Connection walk for them in May. Everyone who went said it was relaxing, nourishing and so good to be somewhere they felt completely safe. I was delighted to meet Issam again last December as part of the Lift the Ban campaign launch, which aims to make it legal for asylum seekers to work.

Yazan is an asylum seeker from Syria, where he initiated urban community composting schemes and campaigns. I met him in June 2023 on a family-friendly bluebell walk. Yazan is concerned about the environmental crisis unfolding in Syria due to climate change and civil war. He told me: “Before the war, there was eight to 10 per cent forest cover in Syria, now it’s two to three



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Connecting campaigns

Issam, from Libya, qualified as a medical doctor in Egypt and had been in the UK for more than two years. I met Issam on a “woodland in spring” day in April 2023. He really enjoyed the Earth Education nature connection activities I introduced and expressed his ambition to work in mental health and develop this connection with nature for wellbeing.

▼ Team positioning a log for a leaky dam | Don Catchment Rivers Trust



per cent. Syria has suffered four years of drought, and now there is a major water shortage. Losing forests means losing water too.”



It has been enriching and humbling working on a conservation project alongside people seeking asylum

Yazan connected us to another project, Safe Passage, which campaigns for safe, legal routes for asylum seekers and for children being united with their families. We jointly led a woodland walk for young people with lived experience of the immigration system, from countries including Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, and Pakistan. They organised their own activities, filming statements about the asylum system for social media to support their campaigning. I was seeing our project like a mycelium web: connecting, reaching out and mutually nourishing.

Persecution

I met Shehzad on an NFM day in late June last year, when we surveyed the impact of one of the leaky dams on the hydrology of the stream and the flora on the banks. Shehzad was an English teacher and has been in the UK for two-and-a-half years, still pursuing his asylum claim. He explained to our volunteers of the persecution of people fighting for independence since 1948 in the region of Balochistan, now part of Pakistan and Iran. More than 1,000 people have gone missing and even those seeking asylum elsewhere have been murdered.

Samadou was a very keen volunteer until the Home Office removed him to Halifax. He brought us knowledge of Togo, his West African home country,

its turbulent colonial past and current political strife.

It has been enriching and humbling working on a conservation project alongside people seeking asylum from countries affected by climate change, conflicts and war, and understanding those interconnections.

Mental wellbeing

We have seen the resourcefulness and skills many of our participants bring, which could be so valuable to our society and economy, but for many months or years asylum seekers are in limbo, unable to work, with deleterious effect on their mental wellbeing. It's heartening to add our voices to the Lift the Ban campaign, which is surely a win-win for everyone.

We are proud and privileged custodians of this 32-acre ancient woodland, managing it to be resilient to climate stress, enhancing biodiversity, and welcoming communities with little access to nature. It seems a tiny and insignificant contribution to bettering the world, in light of countries torn apart by wars, climate breakdown and hostile environments. However, we know we are relationship building, making new connections to nature and each other, and part of a bigger web of nurture and resilience for people, woodland and our planet. 🌱

Find out more



For further details on the projects within this article, visit:

newfieldspringwood.org.uk

dcrt.org.uk (Don Catchment Rivers Trust)

sheffieldvolunteercentre.org.uk/new-beginnings-project

eartheducation.org.uk

refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban

safepassage.org.uk



Testimonials

Here are a few of the comments from the asylum seekers and refugees who took part in conservation and activity days at Newfield Spring Wood:

“The best part was being far from the city (in what) I felt was a calm place, and the group was very supportive.”

“This is the first time I have felt peace in six years.”

“The best thing about the day was working in a woodland with friendly and hardworking people from different countries.”

“I feel really connected to nature here.”

“It was fantastic, bluebells everywhere made me happy. It's the first time I've been to a wood like this. Very exciting and beautiful.”

Photo: Building the shelter | Heather Hunt