

Press Release

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**Training could improve value of agri-environment schemes, say researchers**

The effectiveness and value for money of agri-environment schemes have been questioned by some academics and commentators. But researchers working on a [Rural Economy and Land Use Programme project](http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/policy%20and%20practice%20notes/37%20Bullock/PPN37.pdf) found that a relatively small amount of training for farmers engaged in these initiatives could significantly enhance their outcomes.

The interdisciplinary team, which brought together researchers from NERC Centre for Ecology & Hydrology and the universities of Exeter and Reading, investigated two options for creating wildlife habitats that are currently available under the Entry Level Stewardship Scheme: the first aims to provide winter food for farmland birds by sowing high energy seed crops, and the second provides pollen and nectar-rich flowering plants for butterflies and bees. The research took place on 48 farms over a period of five years, with half of the participating farmers undertaking training.

The results showed that agri-environment schemes do have the potential to provide good resources for bumblebees, butterflies and birds. However, not only are the experience and skills of the farmer very important in ensuring that the schemes are implemented as effectively as possible, but his or her attitude and engagement with the scheme’s objectives also play a major role in their level of success.

The researchers found that the farmers who took part in a training course showed a higher level of skill, and were also more positive and professional in their approach when putting the schemes into practice. They created higher quality wildlife habitats and this translated into local increases in target species of birds, butterflies and bees. The farmers also said that they enjoyed the training and found it beneficial.

The scientists concluded that a relatively small investment in training, with some follow-up advice made available, could provide good value for money by enhancing the environmental outcomes.

Professor James Bullock from NERC Centre for Ecology & Hydrology said: “Stimulating the motivation and understanding of farmers does seem to be key to getting the most out of these agri environmental interventions. It may be that financial incentives alone are not the most effective means of getting farmers involved.

“Of course, it is vital to have the right people delivering such training. They must have the experience and skills to command the respect of the farmers who often have years of experience in managing their own land. And we also felt that the farmers’ own knowledge of the environment and the needs of local wildlife populations could be fed back much more into policy and practice development.

“The farmers who took part in training during our research project were enthusiastic about the benefits and really enjoyed the experience. But obviously if this became a standard element in agri-environment schemes it would be necessary to consider whether training should be voluntary or mandatory. One possible option would be to include participation in training in the calculation of the points required to meet minimum stewardship thresholds. This would mean it was a voluntary option but there would be an incentive to take part.”

Notes for editors:

1. Further information about the results is available in the latest Policy and Practice Note in the Relu series which may be downloaded from the [Relu website](http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/policy%20and%20practice%20notes/37%20Bullock/PPN37.pdf).
2. The [Rural Economy and Land Use Programme](http://www.relu.ac.uk/) is an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), with additional funding provided by the Scottish Government and Defra. Follow Relu’s latest news on twitter @Reluprogramme or website [www.relu.ac.uk](http://www.relu.ac.uk)
3. The [Centre for Ecology & Hydrology](http://www.ceh.ac.uk/) (CEH) is the UK's Centre of Excellence for integrated research in the land and freshwater ecosystems and their interaction with the atmosphere. CEH, part of the Natural Environment Research Council, employs more than 450 people at four major sites in England, Scotland and Wales, hosts over 150 PhD students, and has an overall budget of about £35m. CEH tackles complex environmental challenges to deliver practicable solutions so that future generations can benefit from a rich and healthy environment. You can follow the latest developments in CEH research via twitter @CEHScienceNews and their rss news feed <http://www.ceh.ac.uk/rss/rss.xml> Website: [www.ceh.ac.uk](http://www.ceh.ac.uk)
4. The University of Reading’s Centre for Agri-Environmental Research (CAER) carries out high-quality scientific research that aims to reconcile the often-conflicting demands of agricultural production and environmental protection. Reading is ranked #1 for agriculture in the Guardian and Complete university guides for 2013. More information from: [www.reading.ac.uk/apd](http://www.reading.ac.uk/apd)
5. The University of Exeter is a leading UK university and in the top one percent of institutions globally. It combines world-class research with very high levels of student satisfaction. Exeter is ranked 9th in *The Sunday Times University Guide*, 10th in the UK in The Times Good University Guide 2012 and 10th in the *Guardian University Guide*. In the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 90% of the University’s research was rated as being at internationally recognised levels and 16 of its 31 subjects are ranked in the top 10, with 27 subjects ranked in the top 20. The University has over 18,000 students and is developing its campuses in Exeter and Cornwall with almost £350 million worth of new facilities due for completion in 2012. It has accepted an invitation to join the Russell Group from 1 August 2012. For more information see [www.exeter.ac.uk](http://www.exeter.ac.uk)
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