

365 Living Ark Project @ Conkers

Introduction

The National Forest is a visionary project that is transforming two hundred square miles of the English Midlands, creating a new multi-purpose forest for the nation. The forest spans across three counties, North West Leicestershire, South Derbyshire, and East Staffordshire. It is located right at the heart of England and is symbolically central to the United Kingdom. This region was also the former coal belt of the English Midlands and was host to many working collieries, which left the ground derelict and scarred once the mines closed. After years of mineral extraction and as an area low in woodland cover (6%) the land was ripe for regeneration, resulting in the National Forest being created here. In 1995 the National Forest Company was set up and planting of native tree species started intensively. To date, over 8 million trees have been planted, dramatically improving the landscape and creating an environment for residents and visitors to be proud of.

Some of the many aims of the National Forest are;

- To Regenerate land
- Boost Biodiversity
- Provide sustainable timber sources
- Provide employment
- Provide leisure and recreation facilities
- Provide environmental education
- Absorb carbon from the atmosphere

Conkers was set up as a visitor attraction at the heart of the National Forest, to enhance public involvement and to create an environmental education centre for the region. It is located on the old Rawdon and Marquis Colliery sites and is now 120 acre developing woodland with many attractions internally such as, the assault course, the barefoot walk, children's playgrounds, interactive exhibits, and woodland walks. Annually Conkers has averaged over 220,000 visitors and has received much positive recognition as an exemplar for sustainability and environmental education.



Assault Course



Barefoot Walk

Living Ark @ Conkers

The 365 Living Ark Project at Conkers would tie in perfectly with the sustainability and educational ethos of the National Forest. The scope for education and public involvement is

immense and we are quite excited about the possibilities it holds. Social media broadcasting of the projects will be massively beneficial for the entire region and will bring Conkers and the National Forest to a global audience.

Location

The Living Ark will be located within woodland plot 16 of our Discovery site; this is a beautiful woodland copse with a broad range of native trees such as;

- Alder- Black, Grey, Red
- Silver Birch
- Common Hazel
- Common Ash
- European Holly
- English Oak
- Willow – Pussy, Grey, Crack
- Common Aspen
- Scots Pine



Woodland Plot 16

Ark Location

After 15 years of growth the copse is now in need of major management which will take place this winter season. Much of the Alder needs to be removed as it was originally planted as a nurse crop to enable other species to thrive. Thinning of woodlands is a natural part of management plans and will increase the sunlight exposure enabling ground flora to flourish creating a wider density of species. Also management within our woodland copses will produce a sustainable supply of timber for charcoal production and wood fuel supply. Management of woodland plot 16 ties in perfectly with the Living ark project as a natural clearing will be created at the northern edge of the copse, providing a beautiful location for the Living in project. The ark will also overlook our wildlife pond which is the only natural wetland on our site, providing a perfect setting for social media footage to be recorded.



Wildlife Pond

Overlooking Wildlife pond from Ark Location

Accessibility

Woodland plot 16 is located within easy reach of the coach park and is easily accessible due to proximity of service gates and a two metre wide gravel track running adjacent to it. This will ensure the ease of delivery for equipment to construct the Ark and provide minimum disruption to our visitors during this time. However there may be a slight issue with getting heavy equipment from the track to the ark location, which is 50 metres within the woodland. If this is foreseen as a big problem for our construction we may have to look at potential alternatives.

Woodland plot 16 is also within an easy walking distance of our Discovery Centre and a Living ark in this area would prove readily accessible for visitors to reach, taking them to a beautiful part of our site that is currently under utilized.



Access Track



Ark Location from access track

Direction and Spacing

Planning permission will not be needed as the Living ark is classed as mobile and is under the required size for structures that require planning approval on our site. It will fit perfectly into our created forest clearing and ties in with our management plans for the area. Six Willow and nine Alder Trees will have to be removed, leaving us with a 9 metre by 5 metre spacing; more clearance can be done if needed. Replanting of trees will not be necessary.

The ark will be south facing and with carefully located solar panels and increased forest clearance it should receive maximum sun exposure. It will be located on high ground so systematic placing of wind turbines should ensure maximum efficiency. Surrounding high ground can also be utilised if necessary.

Wildlife

Woodland plot 16 and the surrounding woodlands and wildlife pond are rich in fauna; we have had many great wildlife sightings in the area. Grey squirrels and rabbits are regularly spotted and often in the early morning and evening, sightings have been recorded of foxes and Muntjac deer crossing the track into the woodland. Jays, Green Woodpeckers, Woodpigeons, Great tits, Coal Tits, Long Tailed Tits and Blue Tits have often been recorded, along with Robins and Chaffinches. Occasionally in the winter season we have recorded Goldcrest sightings here which is always a special treat. In the wildlife pond Moorhens, Coots, Mallard Ducks, Mute Swans and Grey Herons are often spotted along with a broad range of Dragonflies and Damselflies during the summer months. Snipe and other winter migrants have occasionally been recorded in this wetland area also. Overhead, Buzzards and Kestrels are often sighted along with the occasional Sparrow Hawk or Hobby flying past. Recently we have had Barn owl sightings hunting over the rough grass land at the top of Conker Discovery. Just last week an exciting observation was recorded of a Weasel hunting and catching a Pygmy Shrew along the wildlife pond verges.

Within woodland plot 16 small mammals such as Wood mice, Bank Voles and Pygmy and Common Shrews have been recorded as well as sightings of Common Lizards, Common Toads and Great Crested & Smooth Newts.

Great Crested newts are a priority species and protected by law, great care will have to be taken during construction of the ark so not to disturb any populations. It is believed by the Ranger team that the newts breed in the wildlife pond and come to the woodland copse for shelter and

foraging throughout the year. Their locations are known by the Rangers and any work undertaken in this area will have to be done with ranger supervision to ensure welfare of all species. The location of the Living ark in this region will be a perfect opportunity to broadcast and educate on biodiversity within the English Countryside and also on living in harmony with nature.



Common Lizard

Great Crested Newt

Education

A wood burner within the living ark has been authorised by Conkers senior management as long as it ties in with proper safety regulations. One of the aims of the National Forest is to promote wood fuel awareness and we feel that an ark without a woodstove would miss a great opportunity to highlight the benefits of wood fuel. A sustainability programme would be put together to educate on woodland management for biodiversity and wood fuel production. Guided ranger walks and talks can take place at the ark on a daily basis creating awareness and broader understanding at all levels. Phil's idea of a social media session at the ark would also be a fantastic educational opportunity.

Conclusion

The 365Living ark project is a very exciting initiative for all parties to be involved in. There is scope for enormous development on many levels - sustainability, education, awareness, enhanced customer experience etc. It is hoped that this project will be the starting point for a range of sustainable living projects across the region. It is the beginning of an exciting era within the National Forest.