

## Nature, Culture And Celebration

### Engaging ethnic communities with green spaces through cultural events

The Millstream Way follows the River Cole and the Chinn Brook for 6 miles through the western suburbs of Birmingham. It is a haven for wildlife and a site of considerable heritage interest linked to the author of Lord of the Rings, JRR Tolkien. Although the Millstream Way passes through diverse communities, attracting visitors and volunteers from various backgrounds, until 2004, ethnic communities had not been fully engaged with the existing programme of events.

The City Council Parks and Nature Conservation Service is committed to improving its working relationships with BME communities and so looked to develop a series of activities, as part of their events programme, which reached out to local BME communities. Nature, Culture and Celebration is intended as a multicultural statement of the shared understanding of nature and our common future, through use of a green space that belongs to all.

### Making it happen

During the winter and spring of 2003, *Millstream Project Ranger Service* in partnership with the *Black Environment Network (BEN)* and the *Springfield Project* - a community outreach project, based at St Christopher's Church - planned a series of four events aimed specifically at ethnic community groups from the Sparkhill, Small Heath, Moseley and Hall Green areas. The events, which took place in Greet Mill Meadows alongside the river, focused on aspects of nature such as birds, water, trees, and plants for food. Participatory arts and crafts activities were arranged that linked with traditional festivals or to highlight cultural themes. For example, storytelling sessions explored the migration of birds and people.

Nature, Culture and Celebration events brought together a wide range of community groups and environmental organisations, providing excellent opportunities for outreach and community development. Smaller groups such as the local branch of the *Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)*, *Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust*, *Burberry Brickworks Community Conservation Project* and the *River Cole Clean Up Group* had a presence at the events, as well as major players like the *Environment Agency*.

The celebrations aimed to cater for every age group and the team monitored people's responses to each event, to ensure that the programme would include a range of activities to meet the needs of





the whole community. People from the target communities are starved of chances for self-expression and enjoyment of nature, so Nature, Culture, Celebration created a platform for them to gain access to the arts and the environment. Things to do included storytelling, bird ringing, dance, cleaning up racist graffiti, environmental art and henna hand painting.

BEN provided training to park rangers and managers, focusing on awareness of cultural diversity and sharing good practice in cross-cultural communication, as well as facilitating links between park staff and local community groups, and advice and support in

publicising the programme in ways which would stimulate and engage with the local communities. Multilingual leaflets were distributed to schools, colleges, community centres, places of worship, shops and markets in the local area.

## The Future

The project's aims included increasing the numbers of BME volunteers in conservation groups and encouraging people from ethnic communities to enrol on environmental courses. There are opportunities for ethnic community engagement in regular conservation sessions. In the longer term, the Millstream Way Rangers hope to develop a positive action work placement scheme and a programme of vocational training.

## FACTFILE

- **Funders:**

BEN funded the events from the budget of the Ethnic Environmental Capacity Building Project (Community Fund). The staff training element was funded by Birmingham City Council, Department of Leisure and Culture

- **Partners:**

Millstream Project Rangers Service; Birmingham City Council Parks, Sport and Events; Black Environment Network; Springfield Project.

- **Target:**

People of all ages from ethnic community groups in Sparkhill and other areas local to Millstream Way.

- **Numbers:**

250 - 300 people attended the four events.

- **Key points:**

- Local green spaces can provide all communities with the opportunity to come together, express and give socio-cultural context to the environmental themes which are common to all cultural heritage.



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