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Celtic Rainforests LIFE - LIFE17 NAT/UK/000020

Case Study: Capturing the Heart of the Community - Inspiring Change

Summary

- Celtic Rainforests LIFE is a €9.6m programme protecting temperate rainforests across four Special Areas of Conservation in Wales (SACs) through habitat restoration and invasive species control.
- These globally important woodlands support a diverse range of biodiversity and are particularly important for oceanic assemblages of lower plant species.
- They are intricately woven into Welsh culture, language and identity.
- To date (March 2026), over 200 community focussed events, school field visits, training and demonstration days have been held, alongside the production of practical resources aimed at raising awareness of the habitat.
- The project demonstrated that clear communication, strong partnerships and community-driven action are vital for conservation success.

Celtic Rainforests

Celtic Rainforests LIFE is a €9.6m partnership working across Wales to restore and protect what remains of the nation's temperate rainforests. Government bodies, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), and local communities joined forces across four Special Areas of Conservation in Wales (SACs) to tackle Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) and improve woodland condition. The project's goal is to secure these rare habitats for the future while supporting sustainable land management across the wider landscape.

Temperate rainforests are globally rare, and survive today in the UK as ancient, fragmented woodlands along the western seaboard. Their mild, wet climate supports a diversity of lower plant species - mosses, liverworts, bryophytes and lichens - many of which are found in only a handful of places worldwide¹. This rich ground layer sustains a complex web of invertebrates, which in turn support birds, mammals and other wildlife. Species such as pine marten *Martes martes* live here². Pied flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* and Wood warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*, both migrating from Africa in early Spring³, rely on these habitats for reproduction.

Why are they important?

These woodlands have shaped Welsh identity for centuries, reflected in place names rooted in native trees such as derw (oak), bedw (birch) and celyn (holly)⁴. They feature prominently in Welsh storytelling. The Mabinogi situates key events within these forests, including the tale of Pryderi at Coed Felenrhod and Llennyrch⁵. Cultural links continue through Y Derwyddon (The Druids), whose sacred oak groves on Ynys Môn were ordered destroyed by the Romans in AD 60⁶, evidencing the deep connections these landscapes had in early Welsh society. These woodlands are therefore living monuments to the peoples' history and identity.

Ecologically, today's temperate rainforests are fragments of the post glacial woodland that once covered around 75% of the British Isles⁷. Centuries of land use change - agriculture, industry and inappropriate management - have reduced them to scattered remnants⁸. Protecting and improving what remains, and improving connectivity between surviving fragments is key.

Project Aims & Goals

Celtic Rainforests LIFE set out to build long lasting connections between local communities and Wales's temperate rainforests. Alongside practical habitat restoration, the project focused on inspiring people to get involved and take pride in these unique woodlands. Its aims were to:

- Raise awareness of the ecological and cultural importance of temperate rainforests among residents, landowners, farmers and schools.
- Encourage active involvement in restoration, INNS control and long term care of the woodlands.
- Create accessible learning materials, events and training to equip local people with the knowledge and confidence to act as future custodians.
- Build strong, two way communication and partnerships that turn awareness into meaningful, sustained action.

Engagement turns knowledge into action. When included, listened to and well-informed, people are more likely to share ideas and support change. This investment encourages individuals and communities to stay committed over the long term.

- E1** Raise public awareness of, and encourage active engagement with, Celtic Rainforests
- E2** Produce and disseminate a toolkit demonstrating the 3-stage approach to *Rhododendron ponticum* control
- E3** Produce case studies and hold demonstration days
- E4** Network with other LIFE and/or non-LIFE projects working on habitats H91A0 and H91B0 and woodland restoration
- C3** Establish mechanisms for long-term INNS control

Box 1: Project Engagement Actions

E1 - Engagement

More than 200 events across 13 pre identified population hotspots in close vicinity to the target SACs, reaching community members, landowners, farmers, primary schools and local groups. Activities included talks, guided walks, workshops and practical field training, helping people understand the rainforests on their doorstep and how they can support their recovery. Leaflets, videos, interpretation panels and the project website broadened the audience further, bringing in visitors, policy makers and the wider public. School sessions introduced KS2 pupils to the importance of these habitats and encouraged the next generation to take pride in their local landscapes and play a role in managing INNS in SACs and surrounding areas.

E2 - Rp Toolkit

Building on more than three decades of experience from Eryri National Park Authority, the project developed a three-stage, five-year eradication process that formed the basis of the *Rhododendron ponticum* Toolkit. This practical guide offers clear, accessible advice for landowners, farmers and conservation staff on how to plan and carry out effective control work and has been adopted by Welsh Governments as their go-to guidance for Rp control in their new agri-environment scheme, the Sustainable Farming Scheme.

E3 - Case studies and demonstration days

A series of written and filmed case studies showcased restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS), conservation grazing and INNS management. Demonstration days on project sites gave landowners, practitioners and community members the chance to see techniques in action and learn how to apply them while protecting sensitive site features.

E4 - Networking

The project linked with woodland and INNS initiatives across the UK and Europe, sharing lessons, exchanging expertise and promoting good practice. These connections strengthened partnerships, broadened the project's reach and helped ensure that knowledge and experience was shared amongst others seeking to deal with similar issues elsewhere.

C3 - Long-term INNS control

Specialist support helped develop a bilingual online training module and integrated the use of the INNS Mapper app. In 2026 over a 100 people from local communities, partner organisations and stakeholder groups will take part in practical training sessions. This should create a trained volunteer network able to help keep SACs and buffer zones free from *Rhododendron ponticum* by encouraging those who live within, or close to, the target SACs to report sightings of Rp such that they can be treated accordingly as part of the AfterLIFE plan.



Project Achievements (to March 2026)

Events	Events Held	No of People Engaged
Shows	19	3113
Education	81	1804
Demonstration Days	31	610
Volunteer workdays	26	321
Wellbeing Sessions	10	171
Community Drop Ins	10	141
General Engagement	57	1508
Total	234	7,688

Interpretation Materials	Number
Project Leaflets	2
Rp Toolkit	1
Grazing Manual	1
Case Studies	12
Posters and Postcards	8
Colouring Sheet	2
Walking booklet	2
Interpretation Panels	8
Leaflet Drop (600)	1

Online Presence	Events Held	No' of People Engaged
Website Hits	Welsh / English	119,072
Project Video	2	8835
Social Media	5 Accounts	4,559
Online Webinars	22	965
Total		133,431

14 Newsletters	No of People Engaged
Number of Recipients	6,178
Successful Deliveries	5,945
Unique Opens	3,069
Total Opens	6,676

Case Study:

Education

In June 2023, Celtic Rainforests LIFE appointed Antur Natur to deliver a major part of the project's education and engagement work through a tender process via Sell2Wales. Bringing in a specialist local provider allowed the project to expand its reach and deliver a high quality programme that went well beyond the in-house original targets.

The tender set out to deliver 60 school sessions across 13 key communities, reaching a minimum of 800 Key Stage 2 pupils in bilingual settings, along with training for teachers and educators. Antur Natur far exceeded these expectations. Their sessions took pupils out of the classroom and into nearby temperate rainforest sites, giving them the chance to explore their local woodland ecology first hand and understand what makes these habitats so rare. Each visit linked directly to the KS2 curriculum, helping teachers embed local landscapes into their teaching.

Alongside the pupil sessions, Antur Natur ran five 'training the trainer' workshops. These sessions gave teachers, support staff, and other outdoor education providers the confidence, knowledge and tools to bring their classes outdoors, helping schools continue this work independently.

To date (March 2026), 1,563 children and young people took part in education sessions provided through Celtic Rainforests LIFE, supported by 195 teachers, teaching assistants and education professionals. The project's ambition to raise awareness among the next generation was not only met but greatly surpassed. This outcome shows how working with a skilled local provider can strengthen delivery, broaden reach and overcome internal capacity limits, ensuring that education remains a central part of the project's legacy.

Anita Daimond, of Antur Natur said "These sessions provided learners with the opportunity to develop their skills whilst learning about the woodland and experiencing the wellbeing outcomes associated with being active outdoors. As each generation grows up in increasingly biodiverse surroundings, this becomes their norm. It's therefore important that the next generation have these immersive experiences in special habitats of high conservation value so they can truly learn to value the diversity of nature."



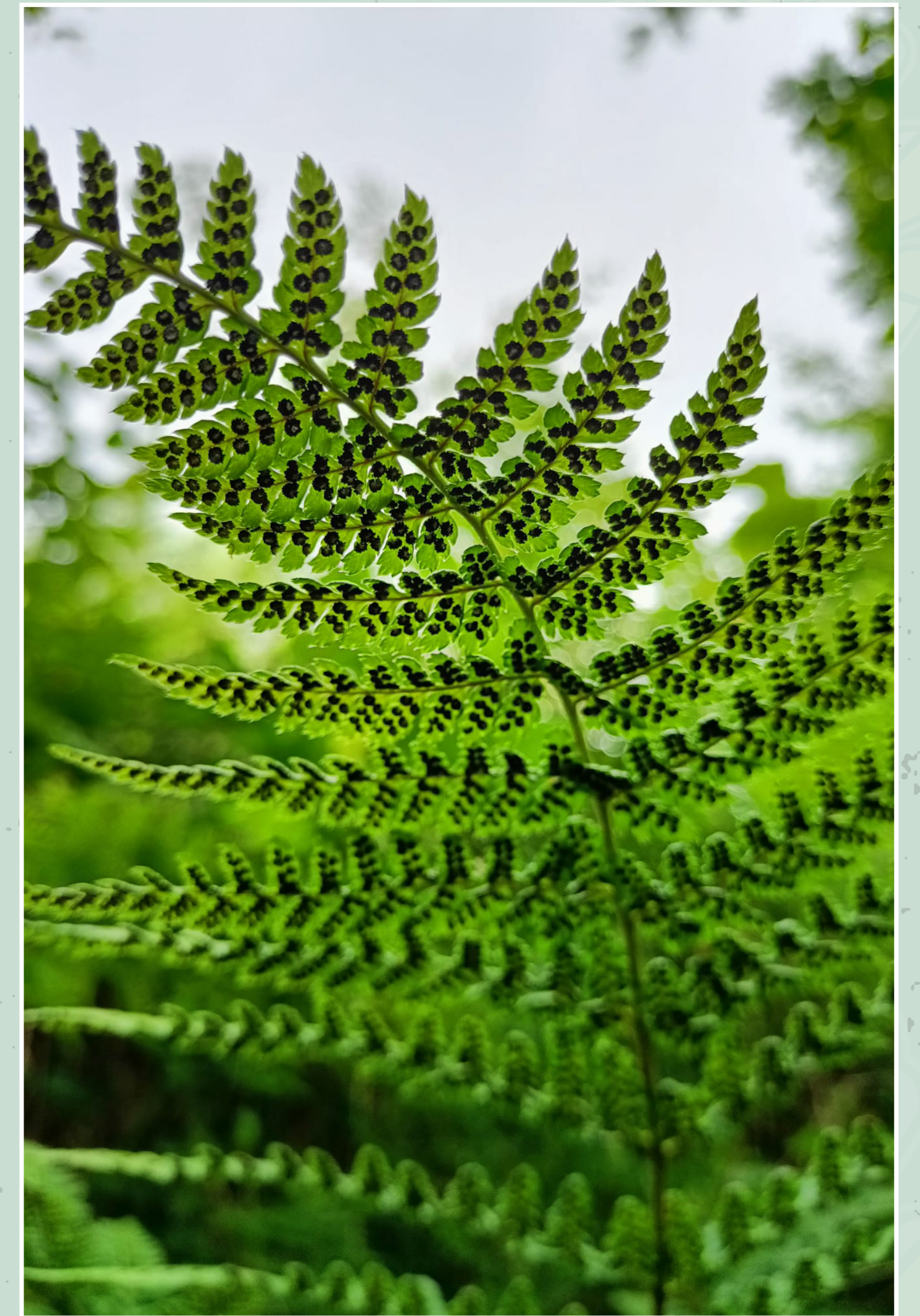
Outdoor education session



Elephant Hawk Moth



Bioblitz Recording



Sorrel fern

Challenges

Early on, interest was low. Some of the first drop-ins had only a handful of visitors because the project was still new and people didn't yet know what it was about. It quickly became clear that timings, venues and local awareness all needed adjusting, and that the project in itself wasn't enough of a draw to bring people to the initial drop in events.

Staff capacity was another issue. The project began with only a part time Engagement Officer, and staffing changes at Eryri National Park Authority meant the team was short staffed right from the start. With a busy programme to deliver, key parts of the work - including the education programme (E1) and volunteer training (C3), were outsourced through tailored work packages.

The Covid 19 pandemic added further disruption just as momentum was building. Face to face events stopped overnight in March 2020, causing significant disruption for a period of 18 months, and the team had to rethink how to stay connected. An example of how this was done was by working in partnership with COFNOD, the local biodiversity records centre, by arranging online workshops and sessions running through 2020. This helped keep people involved despite the circumstances.

There were also moments where communication needed careful handling. Simplifying ecological ideas for wider audiences can sometimes feel like oversimplifying, while sticking too closely to technical language risks losing people altogether. Even the project name, 'Celtic Rainforest', sparked debate in some scientific circles. Navigating this meant staying focused on the aim: helping people understand and value these rare woodlands.

Why Language and Marketing Matter

Gateway to the "Celtic Rainforest"

The words we use in conservation shape how people understand any given project, moulds how they feel about it and influences whether they choose to get involved. Early involvement and clear communication lead to better decisions and stronger support⁹.

Complex and in depth terminology makes information harder to process, and for many people it can feel excluding or overwhelming¹⁰.

When that happens, engagement drops. People switch off, feel the message isn't for them, or lose confidence in their ability to contribute.

Relatable language, metaphors and storytelling help people grasp complex ideas¹¹. These approaches make scientific topics more meaningful and easier to act on. They help bridge the gap between specialist knowledge and everyday experience, which is essential when working with communities who live and work in these landscapes.

Emotive language is not just a flamboyant touch. It is a practical tool that helps bring people in rather than push them away. Choosing language that feels familiar, ensures that the science lands clearly, builds confidence and strengthens the shared motivation¹² needed for long term care of these rare woodlands.

Lessons

Celtic Rainforests LIFE offered a wealth of insight into how engagement supports successful conservation. Several themes stood out across the project.

Adequate resourcing matters

Good bilingual engagement takes time, people and funding. It was clear that greater capacity would have allowed the team to reach more communities, run additional school sessions and strengthen long-term stewardship work.

Communities as partners

The project demonstrated that conservation works best when communities are treated as partners rather than audiences¹³. Whether in densely populated areas or more remote landscapes, local stakeholder involvement was essential. This approach helped ensure that the work carried on beyond the project itself.

Language and accessible science

By explaining ecological concepts in ways that felt approachable and relevant, the project encouraged people to see the rainforests as part of their own heritage. This sense of ownership made it easier for communities to engage with the work and champion the habitats around them.

Networking strengthens impact

Sharing knowledge with other LIFE and non-LIFE projects proved invaluable. Visits, exchanges and joint events allowed the team to learn from others while also sharing their own experiences. This two-way flow of ideas helped spread good practice and strengthened the wider network of people working on temperate rainforest restoration.

Together, these lessons highlight the importance of well-planned, well-resourced and approachable engagement in building long-term ecological and cultural stewardship.

Conclusion

Celtic Rainforests LIFE showed that strong engagement is central to lasting conservation. By involving communities, schools, landowners and local groups, the project restored fragile habitats and helped build a network of informed and motivated custodians who will continue the work long after the project has ended. Investing in their involvement ensures that both ecological and cultural legacies continue to co-exist, turning a time-limited project into lasting, locally driven protection.

¹ State of Wales' Rainforests report (2023) Available at: <https://celticrainforests.wales/the-state-of-wales-rainforests-report> (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
² Temperate rainforests: wet, wild, wonderful woodlands. (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Plantlife-Work-on-Temperate-Rainforest.pdf>.
³ People's Trust for Endangered Species. (n.d.). Pine marten. [online] Available at: <https://ptes.org/get-informed/facts-figures/pine-marten/>.
⁴ Rspb.org.uk. (2025). Reconnect a precious Welsh landscape. [online] Available at: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/donate/reconnect-a-precious-welsh-landscape> (Accessed 13 Feb. 2026).
⁵ Forestfawrgopark.org.uk. (2025). Forest Fawr | UNESCO Global Geopark. [online] Available at: <https://www.forestfawrgopark.org.uk/>.
⁶ Woodland Trust (2023). Coed Felenrhod and Llennyrch. Available at: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/woods/coed-felenrhod-and-llennyrch> (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
⁷ Wikipedia Contributors (2026). Roman conquest of Anglesey. Wikipedia. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_conquest_of_Anglesey (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
⁸ Watts, K., 2006. The legacy of woodland fragmentation. British Forest Landscapes. Forest Research. Available at: https://cdn.woodlandtrust.org.uk/2022/02/qif_legacy_of_fragmentation_may06.pdf (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
⁹ Wild (2020). Atlantic Rainforest Restoration | Wildlife Trusts Wales. [online] Available at: <https://www.wildlife.org.uk/atlantic-rainforest-restoration> (Accessed 13 Feb. 2026).
¹⁰ Brooks, S. P., Agarwal, P., & Green, J. (2022) 'A framework to guide storytelling as a knowledge translation intervention for health promoting behaviour change'. Implementation Science Communications, 3(1), p. 35. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8962242/> (Accessed: 13 February 2026).
¹¹ (2024). Government's principles of engagement. [online] GOV.UK Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-engagement-principles-of-engagement> (Accessed 13 Feb. 2026).
¹² Fish, R.D., Austen, G.E., Bentley, J.W., Dallimer, M., Fisher, J.C., Irvine, K.N., Bentley, P.R., Maximilian Nawrath and Davies, Z.G. (2024). Language matters for biodiversity. BioScience/Bioscience, [online] 74(5), pp.333-339. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biae014>.
¹³ Suzuki, W.A., Felici-Mójer, M.I., Hasson, U., Yehuda, R. and Zarate, J.M. (2018). Dialogues: The Science and Power of Storytelling. The Journal of Neuroscience, [online] 38(44), pp.9468-9470. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.1942-18.2018>.
¹⁴ Fish, R.D., Austen, G.E., Bentley, J.W., Dallimer, M., Fisher, J.C., Irvine, K.N., Bentley, P.R., Maximilian Nawrath and Davies, Z.G. (2024). Language matters for biodiversity. BioScience/Bioscience, [online] 74(5), pp.333-339. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biae014>.
¹⁵ Newing, H., Brittain, S., Buchadas, A., del Giorgio, O., Grasham, C.F., Ferritto, R., Garcia Marquez, J.R., Khanyari, M., König, B., Kulkarni, A., Murali, R., Qin, S., Rakowski, J., Winn, F. and Ghoddousi, A. (2024). 'Participatory' conservation research involving indigenous peoples and local communities: Fourteen principles for good practice. Biological Conservation, [online] 296, p.110708. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2024.110708>.

¹ This document includes content generated with the support of AI tools. All information has been reviewed, verified, and approved by Eryri National Park Authority staff, who remain fully accountable for its accuracy and integrity.



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