

NORTH DEVON UNESCO BIOSPHERE BUSINESS PARTNER SCHEME



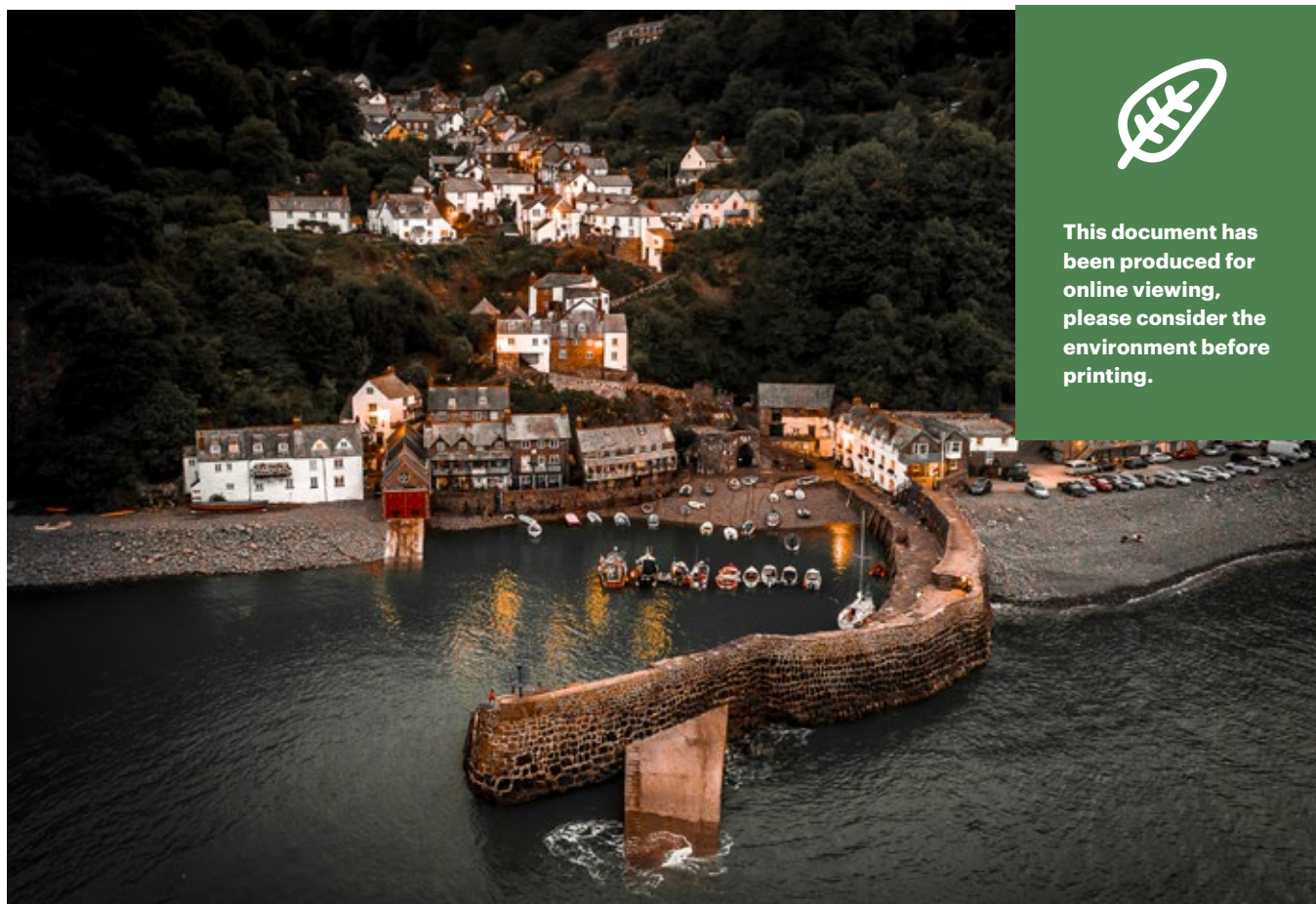
The North Devon UNESCO Biosphere is part of a global network of biosphere reserves set in a stunning, diverse landscape in the heart of Southwest England.

NOVEMBER 2022





This document has been produced for online viewing, please consider the environment before printing.



The North Devon UNESCO Biosphere is part of a global network of biosphere reserves set in a stunning, diverse landscape in the heart of Southwest England. It is responsible for coordinating and facilitating projects that ensure this special place is protected and preserved for everyone.

In March 2020, the North Devon Biosphere Business Partner Scheme was launched offering businesses the chance to protect the natural assets that attract some 5 million visitors to the area each year. This case study outlines how this was achieved.

This best practice guide has been commissioned as a series as part of the "Coastal Sustainability through careers and business skills in Greater Lincolnshire" Coastal Communities Fund project.





SETTING THE SCENE

The heart of the biosphere, Branton Burrows, was first designated in the 1970's, while in early 2,000 a new style, modern biosphere reserve was created under the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere programme.

There are now three Biosphere Reserve zones covering a total area of 5,262 sq km - the core area of Branton Burrows, a sand dune system designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSI); the buffer zone which largely consists of Taw Torridge Estuary as far as Barnstaple and Bideford; and the transition zone, which is formed by the catchment area of the rivers and streams that drain to the North Coast of Devon and the marine environment stretching beyond Lundy Island.

"The North Devon UNESCO Biosphere is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2022, the first biosphere within the UK to be awarded the new style UNESCO accreditation."

In 2018, the North Devon UNESCO Biosphere, in collaboration with Biosphere Reserves in Brighton & Hove and Iroise Isles & Sea and Marais Audomarois in France, established the Bio-Cultural Heritage Tourism (BCHT) project, an EU Interreg initiative which aimed to increase the value of tourism whilst safeguarding and enhancing the bio-cultural heritage values of the areas.

From this 3-year project, the North Devon Biosphere Reserve Partnership identified a need to produce an eco-charter for its businesses to sign-up to, and following several business focus groups, established that this should be in the form of an accreditation.

With this knowledge, the North Devon Biosphere Business Partner Scheme was launched in March 2020, providing an opportunity for businesses to be part of a voluntary sustainable business network that looks after the very assets that attract some 5 million visitors each year.

"Our biosphere is really about creating a sustainable future for everyone in our area"

APPROACH



ESTABLISHING A RELIABLE NETWORK

In creating an eco-accreditation scheme, the North Devon Biosphere Reserve Partnership, a not-for-profit organisation, was acutely aware of the need to keep costs down and ensure it could continue once funding for the BCHT project ended. As a result, annual reviews of member businesses will be peer-to-peer, a solution which also promotes collaborative working and sharing of ideas across the network.

AN OBTAINABLE AND SCALABLE APPROACH

Initially designed with the tourism, leisure and hospitality sector in mind, the North Devon Biosphere Reserve Partnership quickly decided to open the scheme up to the wider business community.

To become a member, businesses must sign-up to at least five commitments from three different categories:

- conservation - including putting up a bird box, creating a wildflower patch or using solar energy
- local development - such as collaborating with others, using local suppliers where possible or creating authentic visitor experiences;
- awareness raising - shouting about the scheme and how proud they are to be involved, helping to promote network events or educating visitors about the impact of tourism and how they can contribute to the biosphere.

The only mandatory requirement is that members agree to an annual peer review, all other commitments can be chosen to align with individual business objectives. Once an organisation has completed its online application, setting out how it proposes to achieve its sustainability commitments, the submissions are reviewed and agreed monthly.

“Raising awareness amongst visitors is key to protecting the biosphere”



BENEFITS TO BUSINESSES

Organisations who are part of the network are provided with the North Devon Biosphere Business Partner logo for use on their website and marketing materials. This helps them to stand out and will only become more beneficial as the scheme develops and the area becomes more recognised for its UNESCO designated status.

In addition, members receive a certificate, a listing and weblink on the North Devon Biosphere visitor website, which highlights their achievements, and an invitation to the annual sustainable business networking event which showcases the work that organisations are doing.

“The most rewarding part of the scheme is seeing businesses work together and thrive”



LINKING IN WITH OTHERS

The North Devon Biosphere Business Partner Scheme is soon to add a new commitment in support of Plastic Free North Devon, a local environmental charity aimed at reducing the impact of plastic pollution, encouraging its businesses to sign-up to the charity's visitor campaign.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Success of the scheme will be measured by annual peer reviews of member businesses to ensure their sustainability journey is on track, they are achieving their commitments, or working towards them, and have submitted information to the online directory.

THE FUTURE OF THE SCHEME

The North Devon Biosphere Business Partner Scheme is currently free of charge to join; at some point it is expected that an affordable membership fee will be introduced to help fund the network. A regular newsletter is also planned, featuring information on available funding, business news and upcoming events. An additional aim is to establish ambassadors located around the biosphere. These individuals would take responsibility for bringing together business partners from their immediate area on an annual or biannual basis to facilitate local networking.

INCORPORATING NEW CAMPAIGNS

The North Devon UNESCO Biosphere has been working with Chester Zoo, which has created the UK's first sustainable palm oil community in Chester, with the ambition of becoming the first sustainable palm oil community in a biosphere reserve. This new campaign will work with businesses, to become one of the scheme commitments they can sign-up to, by stating that where possible, they will look for more sustainable palm oil ingredients.



RESULTS

- **The target was to recruit 20 businesses to the North Devon Biosphere Business Partner Scheme by December 2021; this was exceeded with 60 businesses signed-up**
- **Currently 80 businesses are part of the network**
- **On receiving Gold in the Green Tourism awards certification programme, North Devon Biosphere business partner, Sleepy Owl, Hartland, acknowledge that being part of the scheme had really contributed to their success**
- **Benefitting from vocal advocates, including Earth Friendly Foodware, which supplies compostable 'food and drink to go' packaging and composters across the UK and Europe, who, when collecting the award for 'Sustainable Business' at the Business Action North Devon Business Awards 2022, spoke passionately about why other businesses should sign-up to the scheme**
- **Proud that local businesses are part of a sustainable business network, collaborating with each other for the benefit of the area**

CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNT

RAISING AWARENESS

Visitor surveys conducted prior to the launch of the business partner scheme indicated that not many people knew about the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, even those that lived within it. The Biosphere therefore faced the challenge of raising its profile amongst visitors, businesses, and residents, and did so with a rebrand and awareness campaign in early 2022.

MANAGING INFORMATION

As the number of businesses joining the scheme increased, collecting, collating, and recording information proved challenging. The North Devon Biosphere Reserve Partnership recognised that creating forms and putting in place processes in advance was important, but so too was being flexible to changing requirements and adapting where necessary.

A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Coronavirus posed a huge challenge to the North Devon Biosphere Business Partner Scheme, as its launch event had to be cancelled when the country entered lockdown. Since COVID regulations have relaxed, rather than conducting presentations online, there has been a growing appetite amongst its businesses to attend in-person events and the North Devon Biosphere Reserve Partnership is responding by arranging and facilitating networking opportunities.

GOVERNMENT POLICY

Government policies on the environment can pose a challenge or an opportunity to the North Devon Biosphere Reserve Partnership and the organisation must be ready to adapt accordingly.





TOP TIPS

1. **Speak to local businesses and find out what they might want from an eco-charter or accreditation scheme before implementing**
2. **Get organised in advanced of launching, know what information you are asking for from businesses and how you are going to collect and record it**
3. **Hold in-person networking events, make presentations about the scheme and ask business partners to share their experiences**
4. **Enjoy the work you are doing, take pride in witnessing your businesses thriving and benefitting from being part of the scheme**

For more information contact:

Sarah Jordan

sarah.jordan@devon.gov.uk
biosphere.org.uk/business-partners/about

For more information about the Coastal Sustainability through careers and business skills in Greater Lincolnshire project:

Nicola Radford
Senior Commissioning Officer
Lincolnshire County Council

nicola.radford@lincolnshire.gov.uk
lincolnshire.gov.uk