



## Case Study Creating a better environment for animals inhabiting our former gas works sites

**In dealing with the historic legacy of its hundreds of former gas sites within the UK, National Grid Property carries out environmental improvement works to bring sites back to beneficial use.**

Before works are undertaken, one of the key actions is to assess the ecological impact the works could have on the site. Ecologists are employed to carry out a number of surveys and look for a range of animals from badgers to newts and signs of habitat.

Since the company began its environmental improvement programme in 1996, many different animals have been found inhabiting sites. Various activities have been undertaken to preserve their habitats wherever possible, removing them from the site when works are underway and re-homing either within the site or to a better environment after the works have been completed.

In July 2004 after clearing some scrubland on a former gas works site in Worcestershire contractors identified badger setts. Abiding to the Badgers Act 1992, which protects badgers and their setts, the ecologist called upon the expertise of a Badger Consultant. It was agreed that the best course of action would be to build a new sett in which the badgers could be housed.

Following close guidance from English Nature the contractors used the silver birch trees, which had been removed in the scrub clearance to form the chambers of the sett and used other materials like hay and plywood to create other elements.

Mounds of earth were also laid on top of and surrounding the sett and access points were made clear.

“It was a very interesting procedure that required a great deal of care, attention to detail and close liaison with English Nature”, said Les Leyland, Remediation Programme Manager who oversaw the re-homing of the badgers.

Les continued by saying, “After the new sett had been completed we then had to entice the badgers out from their old sett into the new one. We laid food every night towards the new sett and then monitored it to check it was being used by the badgers before closing down the old sett.”

The process took a couple of months, and once the re-homing was complete the team were able to continue with the site works.

During the summer of 2005 environmental engineers at a site in Wareham, Dorset spotted what they thought to be a grass snake during a site investigation. Both slow worms and grass snakes are fully protected species by Section 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and have to be relocated before work takes place on a large scale.

A Phase 1 habitat survey was carried out, which confirmed that such animals were likely to occupy the site. This was followed by a presence/absence survey to determine the numbers and species in the area, which highlighted that there were a significant population of slow worms and grass snakes.

In liaison with English Nature a migration strategy was agreed to relocate the reptiles. The capture and subsequent release of the reptiles took place at a suitable site, in Wareham. A fence was also installed around the site, which would prevent the reptiles from returning.

The final stage was to undertake a destructive habitat survey following the relocation exercise to help prevent the reptiles from re-colonising the site. This involved cutting back vegetation and turning over the topsoil. An ecologist was on hand to relocate any reptiles not found in the mitigation process. A total of 67 slow worms and 3 grass snakes were re-located.

George Lewis, Regeneration Manager in charge of the Wareham project, said: "We carried out a methodical approach towards identifying, removing and re-homing the reptiles which worked very effectively. The remediation works were not delayed by the presence of the reptiles, however the three months between determining their presence and clearing the site could have had an impact on the programme. The timing of the migration in relation to any remediation works was also vital as there are periods, generally in the summer months, when conditions are not suitable for the surveys."



All documentation relating to the process was passed to the Local Planning Authority as part of the Planning Application for the remediation of the site.

Two great crested newts, a species protected by European Law, were discovered in April 2004, during site clearance works at Lostock Hall, Preston.

The project ecologist advised that they were likely to be a fraction of a much larger population newts and a fuller survey was required to build an understanding of distribution and behaviour of the metapopulation.

The survey initially found that 12 great crested newts and 17 smooth newts, also known as common newts, resided on site. As National Grid was unable to re-home the newts on site, they worked in partnership with South Ribble Borough Council and Lancashire County Council to identify a suitable site and migration strategy for the newts.

Following a period of consultation, it was agreed that the newts would be moved to nearby Walton Park. Before they could be relocated a number of procedures had to be completed, including the gaining of planning permission to create a new wetland habitat for the newts.

Finally, an application for a DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) licence was completed, including details of the size and overall design of the wetland habitat, the reasons for relocation and method statements for transporting the newts. With the appropriate paperwork and licence in place, National Grid and its team of experts began work on the new habitat.

The newt's new home comprised a number of shallow wetland ponds with graded edges for breeding; suitable terrestrial and aquatic vegetation; a connection to a reasonable area of foraging habitat; and finally areas of loose materials including rubble and logs for protection and hibernation purposes.



The newts were caught and transferred to their new home using harmless traps located in wet areas around the site. The traps were checked each morning and any newts carefully released into the new habitat.

Over 20 great crested newts and 100 smooth newts were moved from the site to their new home in Walton Park, thus allowing remediation works to commence on the southern half of the site at Lostock Hall in 2005. A similar exercise was also carried out on the northern half of the site and to prevent the newts returning to the area, a 'newt fence' was also erected at the perimeter of the site.

**Phil Kirby, Managing Director of National Grid Property, said:**

**"It is paramount that our work does not adversely effect the ecology that exists on sites and that if animals are identified then we invest our time ensuring that we create a better environment for them whilst we undertake works."**

I am proud of our teams as they rigorously ensure that we not only bring sites back to beneficial use but we conserve the habitat of the animals and either return them to the site or find them a better home."

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