

River Parrett Trail, Somerset

This was a demonstration project aimed at encouraging sustainable tourism development in an environmentally fragile area (the Somerset levels and moors). It involved an active partnership of 17 agencies including local authority, environmental and tourism bodies and was funded by the EU LIFE programme. South Somerset DC managed the project on behalf of the partnership.

The main objectives of the project were to:

- Create a 42 mile footpath route within the corridor of the River Parrett from source to mouth
- Provide a development and marketing method that is transferable to other geographic areas suffering from economic problems, having conservation needs and tourism opportunities.
- Use visual and performing arts and crafts to stimulate appreciation and understanding of the area and to engage local communities at all levels.
- Transfer demand for travel by car to transport by foot.
- Stimulate awareness amongst communities of the qualities of their own environment and its value as an economic resource.
- Engage the farming community, education facilities, local authorities, tourism industry and arts community and foster partnerships between them.
- Highlight the environmental issues and opportunities of green tourism development.
- Generate £2.1 million of expenditure along the route and stimulate opportunities for enterprise.
- Generate a new, positive integrated identity for the area.

The Final Report of the project, published in March 1999 provides invaluable information and advice for similar schemes elsewhere. Particularly successful aspects of the project included:

1. A continuous programme of events, workshops, talks and walks. "All these events were forms of local tourism, entertainment and social activity, but they also had a more profound function – the process of valuing the landscape".
2. Linking schools projects with artists and craftspeople working on the trail stimulated "excellent responses on both sides".
3. Arts and crafts were conceived to be a part of the dialogue between the landscape and the observer – works needed to fit into context. Community involvement in this process was vitally important.
4. Projects which took the landscape and their communities as their themes served to strengthen local culture and create cultural products (poetry book, novel, formation of community choirs and release of local folk songs on CD).
5. Trail guide giving comprehensive information to visitors.
6. Visitor Centre run by a local cycle hire and sales business aims to encourage visitors to use the trail.
7. Interpretation boards along the route cover a wide range of information on matters of cultural and environmental interest.
8. Awareness amongst local businesses and accommodation providers of needs of trail users and potential benefits arising from them.