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Wild about Plymouth: The family friendly natural history group in Plymouth

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Introduction

The city of Plymouth is one of the greenest cities in the UK, with over 33% greenspace, as well as being surrounded by an incredibly beautiful variety of natural environments (Fig 1.). In 2005, Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery (PCMAG) and the School of Biomedical and Biological Sciences at the University of Plymouth (UoP) began discussions about jointly developing family friendly natural history events. PCMAG and the UoP had previously carried out collaborative *ad hoc* events for school groups and some for families during school holidays. It was recognised that there was a gap for the people of Plymouth to enjoy informal, engaging natural history events.

The group was set up as a pilot under the branding of *Wild about Plymouth* (WaP) (Fig 2). The team co-ordinating the events, the WaP Team, included a member of staff from the UoP's School of Biomedical and Biological Sciences and staff from PCMAG (including, the natural history staff, an education officer, and the marketing officer), as well as several dedicated, enthusiastic volunteers. The aims of WaP are;

- to create once a month family friendly natural history events using sites in and around the city of Plymouth.
- to develop a variety of natural history events which are accessible to all.
- to develop partnerships in the city.

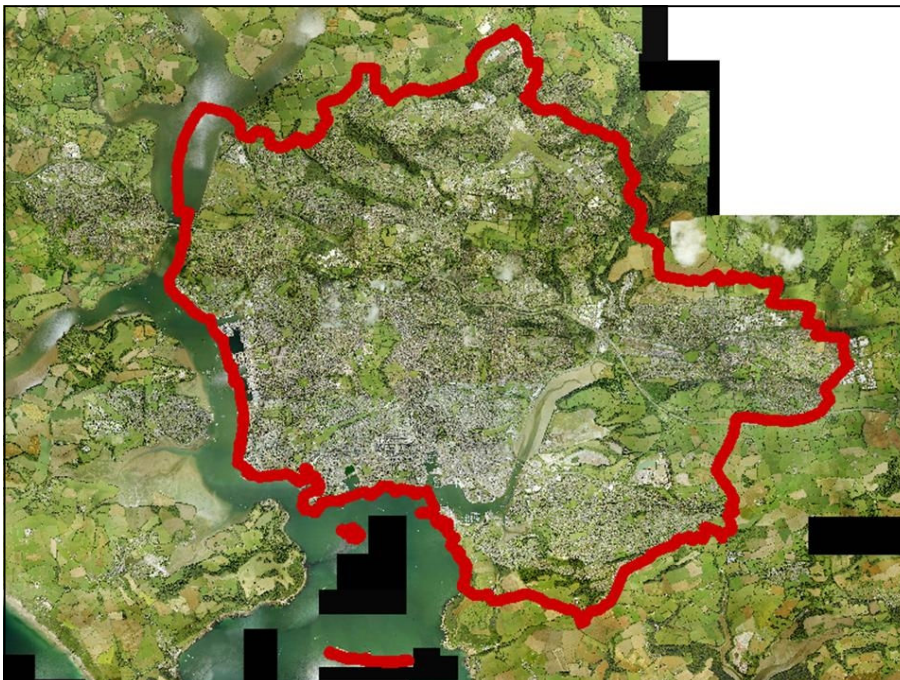


Fig. 1. Aerial image of the city of Plymouth, highlighting the large areas of greenspace.

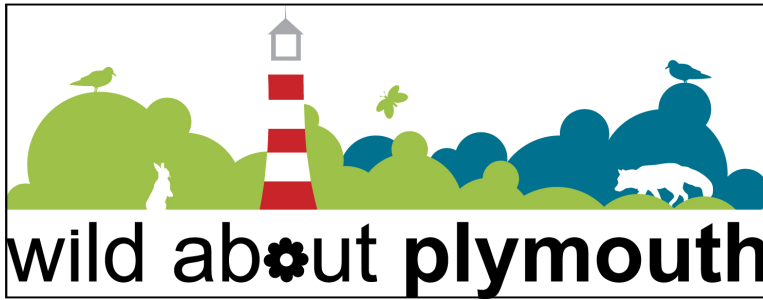


Fig. 2. The branding logo for Wild about Plymouth.

In the beginning

To pilot the WaP events, PCMAG and the UoP organised four events in 2005/2006, supported by funding from *Renaissance in the Regions*. The events included a spring walk in one of the city’s nature reserves, peregrine watching, a bug hunt, and a boat trip along the shores of Plymouth. The first leaflet to promote the events was very basic, and formatted by PCMAG natural history staff (simply, a photocopied double sided leaflet on A4 paper, see Fig. 3). The marketing campaign was minimal, but was also supported by local radio interviews and press releases in the local paper.

The pilot events were very popular and introduced members of the public of varying ages to the diversity of a small selection of wildlife on their doorstep. Staff from PCMAG and UoP were present at each event, supported by staff from partner organisations and keen volunteers. These ‘expert scientists’ were engaging and interacting with the attendees, and were very approachable, explaining the science in a clear non-jargon way without ‘dumbing down’. Experts on hand at these trial events proved very popular with the parents and children, and the public felt comfortable asking questions to find out more information.

Planning ahead

After the success of the pilot events, the WaP Team developed the next programme of events; the WaP programme would run from September to July, fitting in with the academic year and providing a break over the summer holidays. The team planned six months of events for the first part of the programme. Each member of the team organised one or two events and liaised with partners; this worked well to share the planning and the event risk assessments with the WaP Team and the partners. The WaP team discussed dates of the events and arranged who would be present at each event.

With a firm budget set up, a glossier leaflet was produced for the six events in 2006 (Fig 3). A second leaflet was produced in February 2007 for the next five events. The leaflet costs were high, particularly producing two leaflets for one year. The 2009/2010 programme was trialed with all eleven events on one leaflet. This worked well, as partners often needed advance notice to book in events, and substantially reduced the costs of the leaflet printing.



Fig. 3. The old and new. Above left, the first WaP leaflet produced at a very low cost, designed by the WaP Team, and printed on double sided A4. Above right, the next glossy WaP leaflet, planning events more into the future. To further reduce costs, one leaflet for the year programme of events has been produced.

A range of events for a range of audiences

Since the beginning, WaP has offered a wide variety of events to illustrate the diversity of natural history in Plymouth, and encouraging members of the public to become engaged and explore the natural history on their doorstep. The programme has had, and continues to provide, a mixture of biology, botany and geology events (Table 1), which are organised across different sites in and around Plymouth. During winter months, however, some events are held indoors (either at PCMAG or the UoP) as weather becomes a major factor. Where possible, real specimens from the natural history collections have supported the events and the activities to promote PCMAG’s collections.

In the beginning a few of the free WaP events had very few attendees turn up; the events required booking form, and although the form had thirty or so people booked, the number of those that actually showed up to the event was drastically lower. Since then, the WaP team added a small ticket cost for some events to see if it would affect attendance (£2 per adult, £1 per child and under 5’s go free). This system worked very well, with 95% of those that booked and purchased a ticket turning up the event. This additional income generated through ticket sales has also assisted in further resources and goodie bags for the families at events.

Biology Events	Botany Events	Geology Events
Bug Hunt	Edcumbe Explorers	China Clay
Dawn Chorus	Fungi Hunt	Ford Park Cemetry
Dusk Adventure	More Tees with Moor Trees	Naming Nature
Fishy Goings On	Naming Nature	Night at the Museum
In Darwin's Footsteps	Night at the Museum	Riches beneath our Feet
Insect Art	Tudors and Tussie Mussies	Rock around the City
Making a Splash	Woodland Walk	Tales from Darwin
Moths go Batty	Woodland Wander	
Naming Nature		
Night at the Museum		
Seashore Saffari		
Summer Splash		
Winter Waders		
World of the Small		
Wriggly Wrascals		

Table 1. A list of biology, botany and geology based events for WaP. Note: some events cover all three disciplines, such as ‘Naming Nature’ and ‘Night at the Museum’.

The age range of the audiences have varied at the events and it is unpredictable from year to year (Fig 4). The events in the museum (such as ‘Night at the Museum’, ‘Insects in Art’), bug hunts and seashore safaris, generally attract family groups with parents and children under 10 years old. More specialist events, such as ‘Fungi Hunt’, ‘Dawn Chorus’ and ‘The Barbican Fish Market’ attract an older interested audience. To maintain the variety of audiences and not to exclude the older audience, at least one event is planned in each programme targeted for this audience. These more specialist events are bookable with a small fee, to help cover the costs and to ensure that people attend.

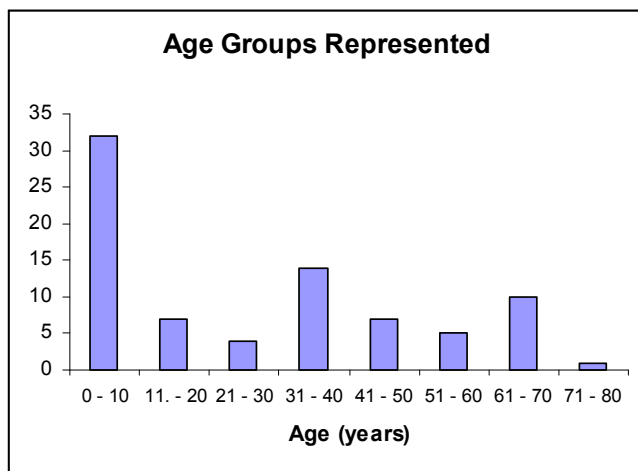
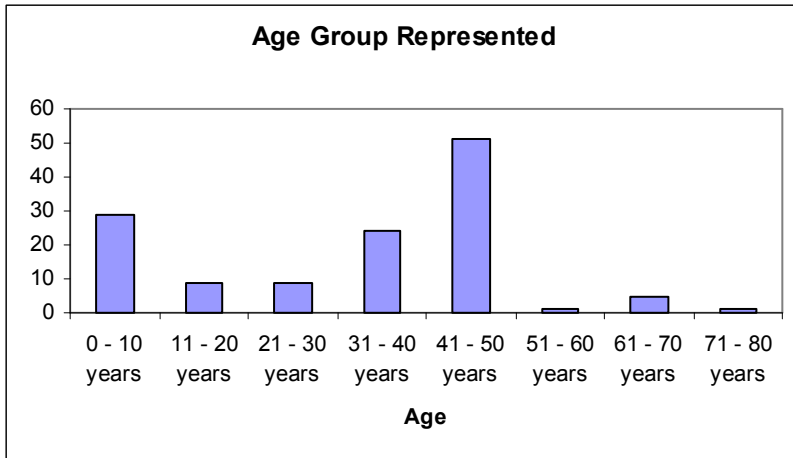


Fig. 4. Graphs of age ranges from 2008 (top) and 2009 (left). Both graphs illustrate a variety of audiences for the two years, with varying ages. The family audience (0-5yr olds and 31-40yr olds) remains consistently high for both years. (Graphs adapted from Freedman, 2008 and Freedman, 2009).

Costs for WaP

Cost associated with WaP have dramatically decreased since the initial set up (Fig. 5). This reduction has mainly been due to a number of factors;

- Producing just one yearly leaflet to advertise the programme of events.
- The initial set up costs were relatively high to build up reusable resources, such as nets, magnifying lenses, pencil crayons, etc. T-shirts were purchased in the first year for staff members and volunteers, so the attendees knew who to ask if they had any questions.
- A small fee charged for some of the events; this income generated is transferred back into the budget.

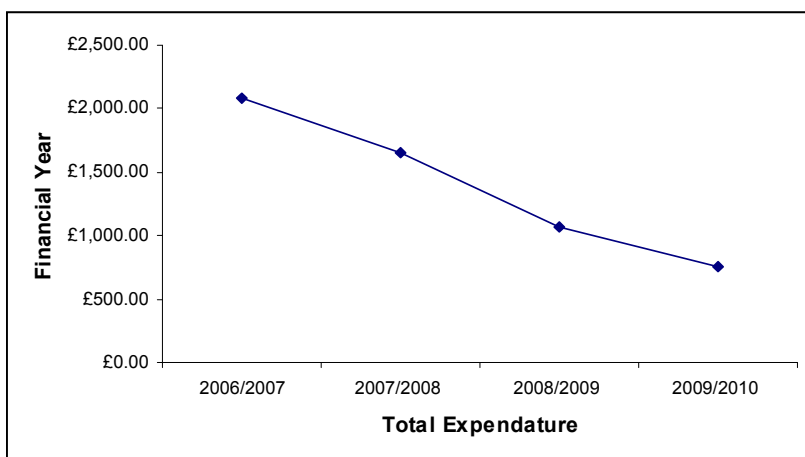


Fig. 5. Since WaP was set up in 2006, the WaP Team have continued to reduce costs. The production of one leaflet for the programme of events and the build up of resources has greatly reduced the costs. (Graph from Freedman, 2009).

The overall cost per visitor ratio has been noticeably reduced (Fig. 6). This has been a result of minimising the costs, and higher attendance figures. The attendee figures have increased from 531 attendees in 2007/2008 to 1797 attendees in 2009/2010. (2009/2010 had four events at PCMAG, with high attendance figures, whereas 2007/2008 had no events held in PCMAG). WaP does have a number of return visitors to events and this has often resulted in the returning families bringing another family along.

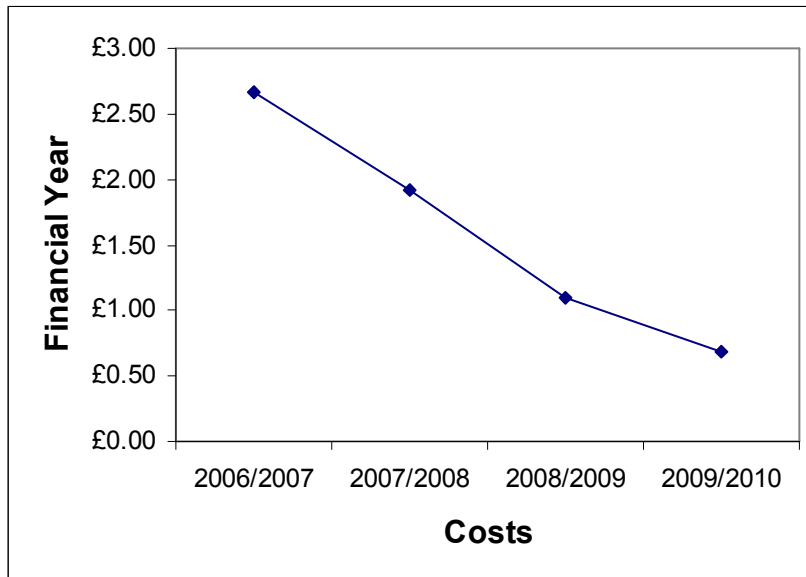


Fig. 6. The cost per visitor ratio has dramatically been reduced from £2.66 –to £0.69. (Graph from Freedman, 2009). This graph does not take into account staff time, which has also shown a decrease in cost per visitor from £5.73 in 2006/7 to £2.40 in 2009/10.

WaP in and around the city

Events are organised in as many different locations in the city as possible, to provide a variety of sites and to reach as wide an audience as possible. Using *Google Maps* to analyse the postcodes of where the events have been held, areas in the city that have not been used can be highlighted; future events can be planned with this in mind and organised to fill in the gaps.

Partnerships

Several new partners across Plymouth have become involved with the WaP events. This has been extremely beneficial for assisting in organising the events; by saving time, producing additional resources and adding extra expertise for the event. Over the last few years, many organisations have begun to host natural history events in Plymouth, and discussions with many partners have suggested that it is incredibly advantageous to join together to organise and run the event. The partnerships have been successful at promoting all organisations as well as offering a greater experience for members of the public.

Evaluating WaP

Evaluation is carried out at every WaP event. (An example template questionnaire can be seen in the Appendix on page 37.) The results are compiled and written up at the end of the calendar year, with comparisons to previous years, recommendations and future developments. All questionnaires from an event are photocopied and sent to the event partner, so they have a copy of the feedback. The questionnaires provided the opportunity for attendees to make suggestions to improve the event, or suggestions for future events.

The questionnaires were devised to fit the Generic Learning Outcomes as set out by the MLA. This method provides a standard of evaluations and looks at the comments made by members of the public in relation to what they have learnt, if they enjoyed the event/activity, if it changed their attitudes, if it gave them new skills and if it has changed what they will do in the future. Some quotes from past evaluation relating to the GLOs (from Freedman, 2009);

Increase in Skills, Knowledge and Understanding

- “About the context (social and historical) for Darwin’s work.”

- *“About Dragonfly larvae before they become proper Dragonflies and that they eat tadpoles and fish. Caterpillars, and spiders and their webs protecting their babies.”*
- *“Tailless whip scorpions are part of the arachnid group like spiders and they shed their skins like snakes.”*
- *“An appreciation of the Georgian architecture – Darwin’s connection to Plymouth”*

Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity

- *“The whole experience – seeing so many people interested in the environment. Great for kids!”*
- *“That everyone was very welcoming and encouraging and activities were fun for all ages.”*
- *“The orienteering was not as easy as we thought it would be – so it was a more enjoyable challenge.”*
- *“Enjoyed looking at the different things that you don’t get chance to see up close normally.”*

Activity, Behaviour and Progression (providing valuable feedback for planning future events);

- *“Cramped seating at the film, more space needed between rows as children swing and kick their legs, kicking the seats in front.”*
- *“Too much waiting around in the cold.”*
- *“The time was too short that we don’t think it was possible to complete the tasks.”*
- *“More pond-dipping nets.”*



Fig. 7. An interesting find at one of the WaP sea shore safaris. The children, and parents, at the events have a very hands on experience! (Photo reproduced with permission).

Summary

WaP is continuing to engage, empower and educate the families of Plymouth to explore the natural history on their doorstep. It continues to be a successful programme of events and has new partners offering ideas for future events throughout the year. The key points that have been learnt and continue to make WaP successful are;

- Building up a stock of **resources** that can be used for future events. WaP has been extremely fortunate to have been allocated a supporting budget from funding via *Renaissance in the Regions*, but this funding could be cut at any time. Planning for the future will safeguard WaP against uncertainty over budgets.
- Through the few years since the initial set up, the WaP team have successfully minimised **costs** year on year. The initial set up costs were high due to purchasing new resources, leaflets, T-shirts, etc. Building up resources, printing one leaflet for the year's programme and working with more and more partners has successfully reduced overall costs.
- Developing the programme of events to be as **varied** as possible to include many different themed natural history events has been popular and encourages attendees to come back again. The questionnaires allow the opportunity for the public to suggest future events, and these are considered by the WaP Team.
- Adding in a small **booking fee** to an event has assisted in covering costs, and will allow WaP to be more sustainable in the future. Another positive effect from adding a small booking charge, is that it ensures that people do turn up to events.
- **Partnership work** has been key to the success of WaP. Networking with old and new partners to help develop ideas and work together has been very important. Working together has promoted the museum to new audiences in different parts of the city, and has halved the amount of time to organise an event. The additional expertise offered from the partners ensures that the events continue to be of a high standard.
- **Evaluation** at each event has highlighted areas which people have or have not enjoyed. Compiling the questionnaires into an annual evaluation has been very important for organising future events, promoting WaP to the rest of the museum staff, and assessing areas for improvement.
- When planning the events, make sure they are **simple** and **fun!** The staff enjoy the events and this ensures that the public enjoy them too!

Appendix 1 (Overleaf): A sample questionnaire to assist in evaluating the Wild about Plymouth events. The questionnaires are filled in with the information about the event and handed out to attendees on the day.

Acknowledgements

The WaP team would like to thank all the partners who have helped make WaP a success for the people of Plymouth. A large thank you to *Renaissance in the Regions (SW)* for the support and budget over the previous 3 years. Finally a huge thank you to the staff and volunteers at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery and the University of Plymouth for their continued support and enthusiasm to help WaP be successful.

References

Freedman, J. 2008. *Wild about Plymouth Evaluation*. Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery.
 Freedman, J. 2009. *Wild about Plymouth Evaluation*. Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery.

Wild about Plymouth:

<http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/museums/museumwildaboutplymouth.htm>

MLA, Inspiring Learning For All: <http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/toolstemplat/genericlearning/>



wild about plymouth

[Event title]

[date]

Thank you for coming to our event today. We would be grateful for your feedback, so we can continue to offer events that all our attendees enjoy!

Name: (optional) **Age:**

Postcode

Have you learnt anything new at this event? What did you learn?

What did you and your family enjoy and why?

What did you and your family not enjoy and why?

Is there anything we can do to make our events better in the future?

Has this event increased your interest in [insert phrase relevant to event] in Plymouth?



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