

BIOBLITZES In YORKSHIRE

Lessons Learned

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This document is a distillation of the knowledge we've gained through running and being involved in BioBlitzes in Yorkshire over the past two years. Two of the biggest events we've worked on were the Scarborough BioBlitz (2-4th June 2011) with the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union to celebrate their 150th anniversary, and the York BioBlitz (15th and 16th June 2012) in Museum Gardens.



What is a BioBlitz?

A BioBlitz is an event where naturalists, scientists and members of the public come together to try and identify living organisms within a defined space. The word “Bio” is short for “Biodiversity”, but research has shown that many people do not understand what Biodiversity means, so do consider whether BioBlitz is actually the best name for your event! If you are going to call it a BioBlitz, you may need to include additional explanatory information e.g. “A race against the clock to discover wildlife”.

The aim

The first thing you need to do when planning a BioBlitz is think about what you want to achieve. Do you want to provide a baseline record of species found at a certain site? Do you want to educate school children about the wildlife that is local to them? Do you want to improve people’s species identification skills? Do you want to recruit members to local natural history societies or other environmental organisations? BioBlitzes have the potential to achieve all these things, but you need a clear idea of which you are aiming for before you start organising.

The site

Choosing a good site for a BioBlitz is critical. We recommend having a strictly defined boundary for your BioBlitz area, for example, York’s Museum Gardens. That way, members of the public, and the press, will know where the survey is taking place and where they need to go to get involved.



Volunteers

We feel that volunteers are the key to the success of BioBlitzes, whether they are helping with identification, welcoming public on the information desk, leading guided walks, handing out leaflets or flyers, helping with evaluation, “tweeting” about the event on social media, or passing records onto the local Records Centre. Advertise well in advance for volunteers, giving people specific roles, and make sure that you give them information about when and where they need to be. If you can offer travel expenses or lunch etc., make this clear. If you have budget available, it is good to provide your volunteers with t-shirts or other clothing that identifies them as part of your event. If you are on a low budget, name badges are good.

Briefing

When your volunteers arrive, they need to be told essentials such as where the toilets and first aid kit are, what to do in case of an emergency, where activities are taking place, who the key members of staff and other volunteers are, and where they can get refreshments. Providing this information on a briefing sheet is a good idea, so they can refer back to it.

Information desk

This is one of the most important parts of the BioBlitz, as it will be the place where the public will find out what a BioBlitz is (remember that many people don't know what the word "Biodiversity" means, so talking about nature or wildlife might be better), what activities they can take part in, and it may also be the point where you keep a first aid kit.

Don't underestimate how much some people may need help with understanding what different activities are taking place, helping them book onto events etc. Even though you may have a clear idea of what's happening, it may not be obvious to your audience!

Advance bookings

At our BioBlitzes, we asked members of the public to book onto activities before the event, to give the organisers an idea of numbers. This was essential for out-of-hours activities such as dawn chorus walks and bat walks. However, for both our events, few people booked in advance and some of those that did failed to turn up, so we also took bookings on the day.

Bookings during the event

Bookings during the event itself, in our experience, worked much better than advance bookings. People dropped into the event, and at the information desk were told about the upcoming activities (start time, duration, level of skill needed, venue etc) which they were then able to book onto.

A group of children and adults are gathered under a large banner that reads "Natural England". The children are mostly wearing red shirts, and some are wearing dark shorts or trousers. They are standing in a line, looking towards the banner. The background is a green field with some trees in the distance.

Natural England

Species totals

There are lots of ways you could use to let people how many species have been identified, from low-technology black or white boards to higher technology countdown clocks and computer screens. As one of the appeals of a BioBlitz is that you are trying to find as many species as possible in an area, it's a good idea to promote this!

Photo consent forms

You may wish to take photographs of people attending the event, in which case, it is good practice to ask their permission first, and you may be required to get them to sign a photograph consent form. This is particularly important when working with children or vulnerable adults. We tend to ask people to read and sign consent forms at the information desk and then provide those who have consented with wrist bands. These indicate to any photographers you have that they have permission to be photographed. Our wristbands were printed with the word BioBlitz on, so any spares can be used at future events and they double as a promotional tool.



Activities

We think it's good to have some guided activities and some that people can do on their own.

Guided activities

These could include guided walks to see bats, certain plants or historical features, or surveying activities, "minibeast" hunts for children etc. We have asked local organisations to run such activities, and they are often keen to help as it means they can promote their work to a wider public. Ensure that all those leading activities are given a recording sheet to keep a note of the species they see, and that they show their group where they can go for identification help after the activity. If you are using social media, ask your activity leaders to provide you with interesting stories, photographs etc. that you can use.



BioBlitz Bingo

We like running a self-guided BioBlitz Bingo activity; it's an easy way of getting younger people and families involved in the BioBlitz. Our bingo sheets consist of an A4 piece of paper with information and pictures about species that are likely to be seen in the area, with boxes that people can tick once they've spotted them. It's good to have a mix of things that people are guaranteed to be find e.g. daisy, 7-spot ladybird, blackbird and things that are a little harder to spot or require a bit more identification skill e.g. woodpigeon. We've found BioBlitz Bingo works particularly well if you get over-run with visitors, as you can send them off on their own for a bit with the sheet!

Meeting points for activities

Think about the layout of your site and how people will find different activity providers and promotional stands. This is particularly important if you have a large site with activities away from your information desk. We suggest using signs or flags to make meeting points for activities obvious. This is far easier than saying "Meet down near that big tree, no not that one, the one on the left...".

Information area

Even if local organisations (e.g. "Friends of" groups, conservation or volunteering organisations, natural history societies, scuba diving clubs etc) aren't able to come along to run an activity or promote their work, they may like to provide you with a poster or other display. We have found this to be popular both with the organisations and the public who attend the event.

Identification zone

BioBlitzes are all about identifying the organisms that are found on sites and therefore you will need an identification area. Our experience says that the bigger this area can be, the better. If you're identifying things to species level, you'll certainly need power for microscopes, and we've found that tables with identification resources that members of the public can use are also essential. Have a range of different identification resources, from the relatively simple Field Studies Council laminated "name trail" sheets for young children, and their species identification sheets, up to advanced identification books. Make sure that all your resources are well-labelled so they don't go missing! We have found that you can never have too many plastic pots for specimens. Once a species has been identified, it is a good idea to stick a label on the pot identifying it e.g. Woodlouse - *Androniscus dentiger*. That way people can look at the specimen alongside the guides.

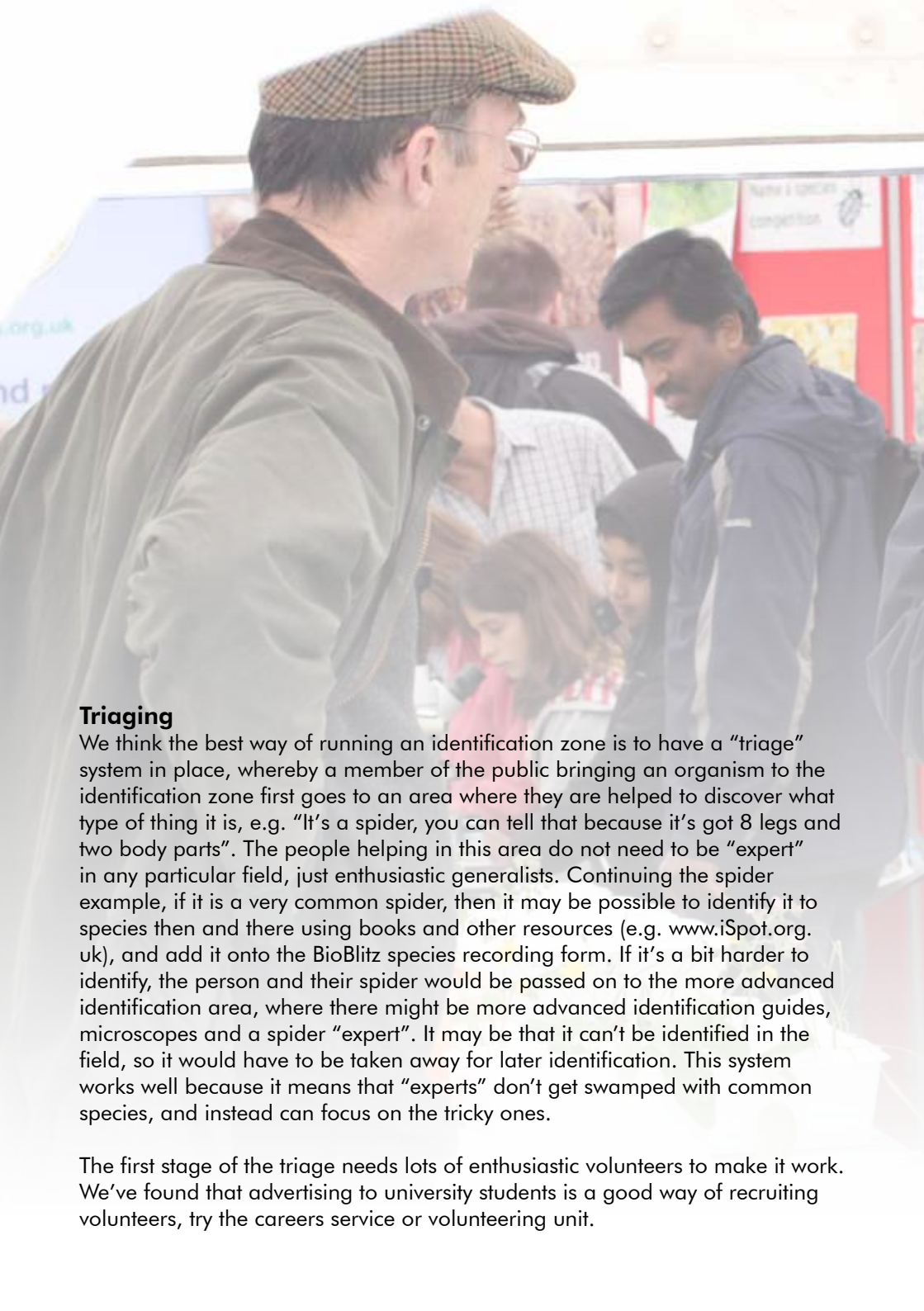
At our York BioBlitz we had the identification zone and the information point in the same marquee. We don't recommend this as it quickly got very busy with people and a little chaotic!

Natural History Societies and Recording Schemes

If you want naturalists to come along to identify the species that are found, you will need to advertise the event to them in good time, being aware that many societies have calendars with excursions and meetings that are fixed years in advance. We made the mistake at our York BioBlitz of clashing with a field meeting, and consequently had fewer naturalists than we hoped for. In Yorkshire, a good organisation to get in touch with is the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union www.ynu.org as they have lots of affiliated societies who may be able to help. For other parts of the country, look at www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/library/digital-library/nature-societies-online/ to find your local society.

It's a good idea to provide your naturalists (and others helping) with name badges or stickers, this helps them to feel part of the event, and means that members of the public can be directed to specific people rather than "that guy over there".

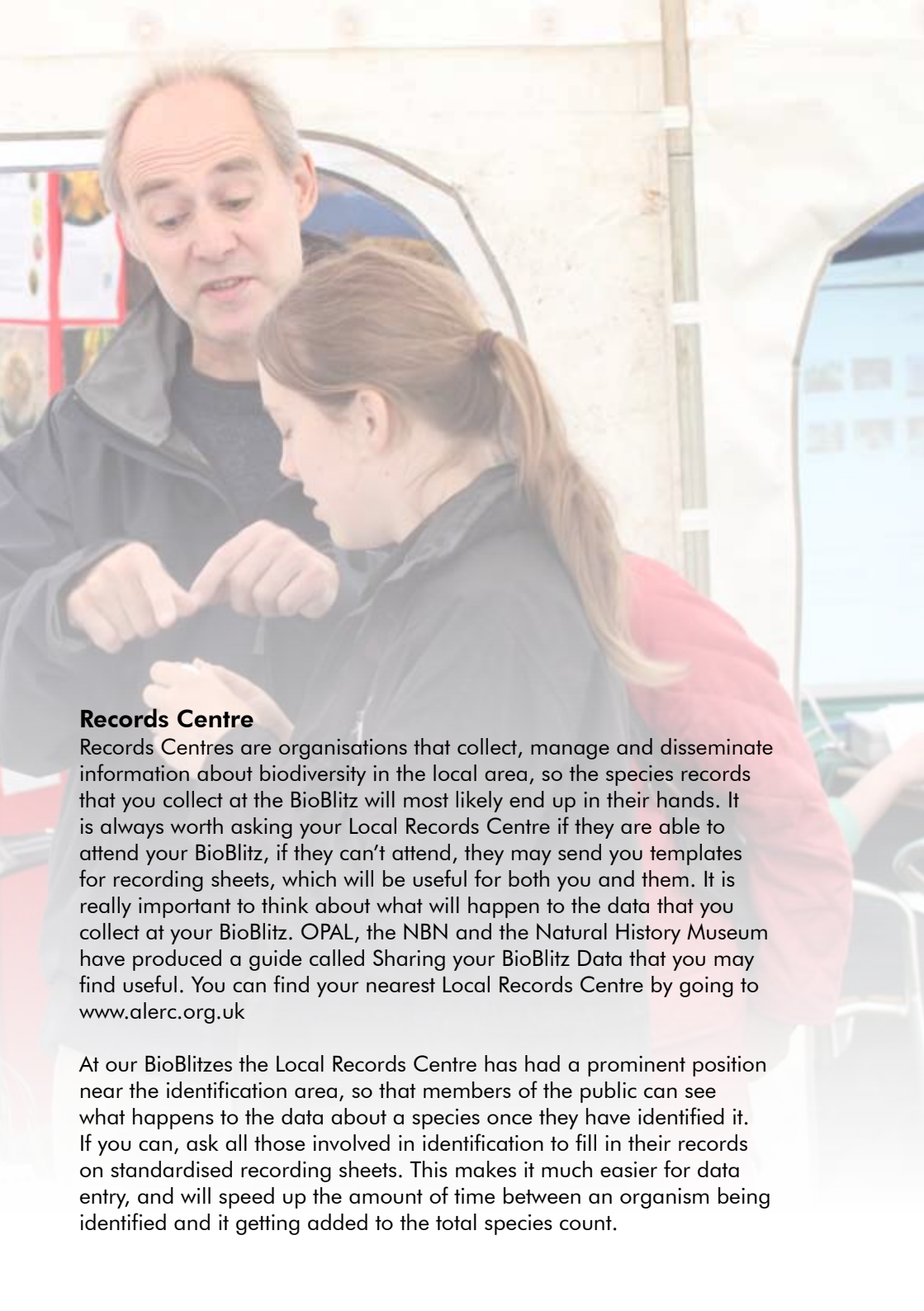
It is worth letting naturalists know that they don't have to be an "expert" to be able to help. Many naturalists would not consider themselves experts in their field, so make it clear that people of all experience levels are welcome.



Triaging

We think the best way of running an identification zone is to have a “triage” system in place, whereby a member of the public bringing an organism to the identification zone first goes to an area where they are helped to discover what type of thing it is, e.g. “It’s a spider, you can tell that because it’s got 8 legs and two body parts”. The people helping in this area do not need to be “expert” in any particular field, just enthusiastic generalists. Continuing the spider example, if it is a very common spider, then it may be possible to identify it to species then and there using books and other resources (e.g. www.iSpot.org.uk), and add it onto the BioBlitz species recording form. If it’s a bit harder to identify, the person and their spider would be passed on to the more advanced identification area, where there might be more advanced identification guides, microscopes and a spider “expert”. It may be that it can’t be identified in the field, so it would have to be taken away for later identification. This system works well because it means that “experts” don’t get swamped with common species, and instead can focus on the tricky ones.

The first stage of the triage needs lots of enthusiastic volunteers to make it work. We’ve found that advertising to university students is a good way of recruiting volunteers, try the careers service or volunteering unit.



Records Centre

Records Centres are organisations that collect, manage and disseminate information about biodiversity in the local area, so the species records that you collect at the BioBlitz will most likely end up in their hands. It is always worth asking your Local Records Centre if they are able to attend your BioBlitz, if they can't attend, they may send you templates for recording sheets, which will be useful for both you and them. It is really important to think about what will happen to the data that you collect at your BioBlitz. OPAL, the NBN and the Natural History Museum have produced a guide called *Sharing your BioBlitz Data* that you may find useful. You can find your nearest Local Records Centre by going to www.alerc.org.uk

At our BioBlitzes the Local Records Centre has had a prominent position near the identification area, so that members of the public can see what happens to the data about a species once they have identified it. If you can, ask all those involved in identification to fill in their records on standardised recording sheets. This makes it much easier for data entry, and will speed up the amount of time between an organism being identified and it getting added to the total species count.

Involving schools

If your BioBlitz is in term-time, you may want to invite local schools to take part, as this is a great way of teaching students about their local environment. Invite them well in advance, bearing in mind that it will take them time to organise supply teacher cover, transport to your site, and permissions from parents. Give them specific time slots to attend and an idea of what activities they will cover. The teachers may want to visit the site in advance to assess any health and safety risks.

One advantage we've found of inviting schools to take part is that if your BioBlitz is a two day event, the students will often bring their parents back on the second day!

Marketing

Good marketing and publicity on the day and in advance is essential.

On the day

The information desk and first aid point need to be in a prominent location and well-signposted. If you are going to have signs produced for the event e.g. Information desk, BioBlitz base camp, we recommend getting them produced without branding so that they can be used again.

Leaflets to be handed out on the day in and around the location are great for encouraging passers-by to attend your event. Your leaflet needs to include information about what is happening, where it is happening, and what times things are happening, with information about where to book events, if appropriate. You could also include space for people to write down the times they have booked-on to activities. These leaflets can also be distributed in advance, as soon as the programme is confirmed.



If you use social media, e.g. Facebook, Twitter, then advertise the links to members of the public so that they can engage with your event in a virtual way too. If you have sufficient volunteers, ask some of them to tweet or Facebook on your behalf to create a buzz around the event.

In advance

Advertise to local schools, brownie and cub groups etc, put up signs in local shops and post offices etc, and contact local papers and radio stations to let them know it is happening. Make sure that all your publicity either contains specific dates, times and places, or has links to websites that contain this.



Evaluation

If you've had external funding for your BioBlitz you may be required to evaluate the success of your BioBlitz, but even if you don't have to, it's a good idea to see what worked well and what didn't work so well. As organisers, you will probably be very busy on the day, so getting feedback from the public (and volunteers etc) will be essential for getting a well-rounded view of what went on at the event.

At our York BioBlitz we had an "Evaluation tree". This consisted of leaf-shaped pieces of paper that people could write or draw on, and then peg onto netting around a tree. This worked well, although we'd recommend putting it in a more prominent location so it is easily visible and lots of comments can be gathered. We would also suggest giving evaluation materials to leaders of your activities so that they can ask members of the public to complete them if they wish.



Feedback

After the event, make sure that you feed back information about how it all went to your volunteers in a timely fashion. This could be a thank you email, perhaps including some photographs of the event or some specific feedback about the activities, and a total number of species found. Also pass this information onto any local press who may be interested, so that members of the public who attended will be able to see the results.



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Further information

For further information about running
BioBlitzes, see the OPAL Guide to
Running a BioBlitz ([http://www.
opalexplenature.org/sites/default/
files/7/file/OPAL-Guide-to-Running-a-
BioBlitz.pdf](http://www.opalexplenature.org/sites/default/files/7/file/OPAL-Guide-to-Running-a-BioBlitz.pdf)).

We hope this guide has been of use to
you. If you have things you'd like to add
and share with others, please get in touch
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