



Case Study: Stuart Fry, dry-stone walling

Safeguarding the Future

sustainable development training
for the professional business



Environmental Management for the Future

sustainable development
training for the Environmental
Management sector

Copyright of the published materials from the Swansea University PP4SD project, in printed and CD formats, is held by the authors. We encourage the use of the materials, and request only that the following acknowledgement is given each time they are used:

"These materials were developed by the PP4SD team at Swansea University, with specialist input from PP4SD UK. Their development and production was supported by the Welsh Assembly Government's Knowledge Exploitation Fund and the European Social Fund under Objectives 1 & 3."

(Copyright of the original PP4SD handbook, on which the Swansea University material draws, is held by the Institution of Environmental Sciences.)





Case Study: Stuart Fry, dry-stone walling

Introduction and Background

Mr Stuart Fry has been a self-employed sole trader since 1993 when he gave up his 'real job' and began working professionally as a full-time dry-stone waller. Since then he has become an established Environmental Conservation National Vocational Qualifications assessor with Lantra, the Sector Skills Council for the environmental and land-based industries. Approximately a quarter of his work involves training young people and adults in dry-stone walling and environmental conservation. His customers include statutory organisations such as the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) and the National Park Authorities, as well as small community groups and individual farmers.

The business draws on a deep understanding and love of the land and the biological and agricultural diversity it supports. The underlying business philosophy uses traditional skills and knowledge. Mr Fry promotes dry-stone walling as a practical stock-proofing tool, rather than a fashionable and aesthetic addition to the landscape. Also its simpler, slower, approach helps make connections and encourages joined-up thinking.

Drivers for Sustainable Development

The sustainability of the initiatives has been motivated primarily by the trader's underlying business philosophy and commitment. The business did not set out with a conscious commitment to sustainability, however the philosophy of holistic thinking, quality craftsmanship and working with nature match the goals and practices of sustainability very closely.

Whilst there are incentives in the sector from land-stewardship schemes (eg Tir Gofal and Tir Cynnal) and drivers from agencies such as CCW, activities and initiatives extend well beyond these, demonstrating Mr Fry's personal motivation. Indeed, at times the business has been frustrated by the role played by bureaucratic organisations. Mr Fry feels that they have lost their way and do not allow such small businesses sufficient voice within the conservation sector.

The Practice

As an individual and businessman, Mr Fry takes a holistic approach to his own carbon footprint. He seeks work which is as local as possible to minimise the need to travel. For most local jobs, a horse, or a horse and cart, are used for transportation. For contracts beyond the range of the horse and cart a small, fuel-efficient vehicle converted to Liquid Petroleum Gas is used. Mr Fry has not flown for ten years and does not envisage flying as he considers it is a highly unsustainable mode of transport. The business is also run with a keen sense of its place in the local community and economy. There is a strong commitment to buying goods and services from within this community to keep wealth and knowledge circulating within the local economy.



Professionally, the business has played an active role in the development of the sector. Over the years Mr Fry has run courses and training, worked with the Dry-stone Wall Association of Great Britain, and written articles for trade-based magazines.



*Opportunities and Obstacles
'The newt has gone out with
the bath water'*

*Source: Larch Maxey
Swansea University*

management industry] is to take a snap-shot in time and to then attempt to get the ecology back to what it was, say, in the 19th century or before World War II".

Joined-up thinking, in contrast, could include a full sustainability appraisal of all contracts before they are awarded. This could include the transport implications of moving stone, other materials, and labour, and encourage the greater use of local materials and labour. This would further open up training opportunities, as there would be a need for local labour. Currently, many contractors travel large distances to jobs.

Thinking local

The experience of this business suggests there should be a presumption in favour of using local traditional techniques and materials, rather than what Mr Fry refers to as 'fashionable' ones. For example, in the Llandovery area of mid-Wales, where the business is based, there is a tradition of using river cobble with a lime mortar, rather than dry stone walling. Whilst this may not fit a predetermined aesthetic idea of what stone walls should look like, Mr Fry suggests it is more sustainable than importing large quantities of stone long distances by lorry! Indeed, he runs his business on the principle that stone walls should be made from the materials available in the area, as opposed to being taken from a geologically-different region. This concept could be developed into sensitivity to geological provenance similar to that acknowledged by ecologists.

Common to all of these activities is a vigorous commitment to promote a more holistic approach to environmental management that is rooted in the land and the human and natural communities it supports.

Thinking holistically

Overall, Mr Fry identifies a lack of joined-up thinking in the sector that leads to a series of obstacles to more sustainable development. Thus he advocates a shift to a more rounded, holistic approach which presents numerous opportunities for sustainability. The search for joined-up thinking spurs on his own drive to make links, develop best practice and operate on a more holistic basis. Mr Fry suggests that a rather narrow, prescriptive approach predominates within the industry because, *"the tendency [across the environmental*



Best Practice

The business has identified another opportunity. More employers and land-stewardship schemes such as Tir Gofal should require contractors to be fully qualified and of the highest quality. Currently, only a small minority of employers require contractors to have a dry-stone walling qualification. If a higher specification of expertise became more common, it could be used to ensure the adoption of best-practice with regard to sustainable and ecological approaches. For example, Mr Fry insists on a thorough, four seasons, year-round survey before any work is carried out, and that walls are built with suitable spaces for all the species found in that area, including species-specific nesting spaces, and passes for badgers and ground-based animals. Such best practice policies could become the industry norm if there were a greater insistence upon fully qualified contractors.

Mr Fry also suggests best practice approaches should be extended to derelict walls and ruined buildings. Policy makers, employers and contractors should view these as potentially valuable habitats. The business has considerable experience of working with derelict walls rich in biodiversity.

A recent contract illustrates this and many of the other points raised above. It was work on a farm at ~1200 feet (400m) in mid-Wales. In order to increase his points within the Tir Gofal scheme, the farmer commissioned Mr Fry to rebuild a 470 yard (~470m) long derelict wall between an established wetland and 18 acres (~7ha) of pasture, which was to be converted to hay meadow.

Currently there is no protection regarding when dry-stone walling work can be carried out. As Mr Fry highlights, however, this derelict wall was populated by *“a massive number of slow-worms, lizards, great crested newts, frogs and toads, because it is located between the three fields and the wetland. It had also been important for generations of summer bird visitors and bird species nesting all year-round. Changing the fields to hay meadow and re-building the wall would change this habitat, but no one was looking at that. No one was monitoring how many bales of hay come off the fields, or how the number of bird and invertebrate species was changing”*.

Mr Fry identifies a lack of monitoring specifically, and a lack of holistic thinking more generally, as major obstacles to the sector becoming more sustainable. A final example of this is the aesthetic drive pushing dry-stone walling in unsustainable directions. For example, there is currently a proliferation of dry-stone walling adjacent to roads near Cardiff and the valleys of South Wales. However, modern road design means that these walls receive considerable vibration from vehicles as the roads are curved to bounce the vibration off to the edges. In order to overcome this problem and avoid theft of the stone, the walls are normally capped with concrete. Concrete has a high embodied energy, and is far less sustainable than more traditional dry-stone walling. Dry-stone walling of this type often also involves the import of large quantities of stone by lorry from distant quarries.



Progress and Learning

Progress and learning towards sustainability are generally monitored by Mr Fry on an informal basis, rather than being set out in a sustainability policy. Whilst this may not be ideal for other organisations, as a sole trader this appears to have worked well to date. Key lessons the business has learnt over the years are that higher quality work, drawing on local traditions and knowledge, often takes longer, but has greater social and ecological rewards that compensate for the loss of short-term economic benefits. However, in the longer term, economic rewards are also achieved through a reliable customer base, and growing the business through word-of-mouth recommendations.

The Future

The business is committed to striving towards joined-up thinking and demonstrating best practice in all it does. This includes minimising its ecological footprint, and maintaining rigorous approaches to surveying and practical work, as well as training and lobbying for wider improvements in the sector. Drawing inspiration from John Seymour's book, *The Forgotten Crafts*, the business strives to play its part in creating a world where the everyday things that surround us are made with care and skill, rather than mass-produced for the lowest price. On a personal level Mr Fry hopes to enjoy a well-earned retirement from 2011.