

Hello

Since first writing to just over 100 Christian retreat centres in the UK a couple of months ago, we have had fantastic responses from around 20 of you, and indications from others that you would be interested in being part of some kind of informal network to discuss environmental issues, setting up Seven Year Plans for environmental change, or just generally seeing what other people are up to.

Right now we're just keeping a list of retreat centres that have answered on one page of our website (<http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=265>, although if the past couple of months are an indication, this could grow in future. We're also featuring one or two retreat centres each time, letting others know about what they are doing, what they are planning to do, and what the key issues are, for them, of their environmental journey.

Before I pass you on to the story of Minsteracres in County Durham however, I have an exciting piece of news to share with you, which is that the network has already had a result.

One small retreat centre outside London replied to our initial letter - saying they were just starting out on the journey to improve their carbon footprint, and were looking at the possibility of applying for zero interest loans from the Carbon Trust for solar panels or something similar: did I have any advice? So I contacted the Carbon Trust to ask about the guidelines, and received a swift email by return to say that unfortunately they did not lend to religious groups.

This seemed a shame: many of you are effectively small businesses run on general ethical principles, and by SME standards you would probably be rather reliable places to put low interest loans for capital improvements - so I wrote to say that. Four days later I received a call from the head of finance for the Carbon Trust, saying that my email had worked its way up the layers of the organization, and that he agreed. The FAQ list on the website has now been changed: religious organizations are no longer automatically excluded.

If anyone has applied for Carbon Trust loans in the past and been refused for reasons of religion, then now is a good time to reapply: for others who are thinking about solar panels, biomass boilers, turbines etc, then this might be a good second alternative to a full grant. Please let us know what happens.

If you have anything you would like to share/discuss, then please let me know – and copy your email to Nicki McHugh who is doing a great job administering this list for ARC. Also if you would like to be featured, then also please get in touch. If you know anyone who would like to join our distribution list please ask them to email Nicki and they'll be added.

With best wishes,
Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC)

www.arcworld.org

FEATURED ECO-RETREAT CENTRE – Minsteracres in County Durham

CURRENTLY

- * ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE SINCE 2006
- * COMPOSTING
- * RECYCLING
- * ENERGY AND WATER SAVING POLICY
- * HOMEGROWN VEGETABLES
- * OUTREACH TO REFUGEES AND PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES
- * REVIVING A 13 ACRE PARKLAND

FUTURE PLANS

- * LOOKING AT ALTERNATIVE LAND USE ON UP TO 60 ACRES
- * LOOKING AT THE POTENTIAL FOR SAVING ENERGY
- * IMPROVING WILDLIFE POTENTIAL IN PARKLAND
- * CREATING A VEGETABLE GARDEN – PARTLY WITH REFUGEES FROM NEWCASTLE DROP-IN CENTRES
- * OWN HENS NEXT YEAR

KEY ISSUES

- * Wanting more information about other retreat centres which are working with renewable energy.
- * Working with vulnerable communities in the local area
- * The advantage of having a dedicated environmental committee

Minsteracres Retreat Centre is situated in a beautiful rural area of North East England and welcomes people of all faiths and none.

In 2006 we started an environmental committee with members of staff, resident community and friends. Since then we have installed

a compost heap, recycling areas and an energy and water saving policy. We use vegetables from our walled garden, grown by people from Northumbria Daybreak (an organisation that works with a people with learning difficulties). We try to use products from local producers as much as possible. This year we hope to start our own small vegetable garden and plan to keep our own chickens, starting with a few rescue chickens but with the aim of building toward self-sufficiency in eggs.

The Centre owns 60 acres of land, which at the present is rented out to a local farmer. Part of the land is in poor condition and we are looking at possibilities of alternative ways of land use. One possibility is to use part of it for the cultivation of willow and other fast growing trees, with the double objective of improving the condition of the land, and providing wood for a possible wood boiler.

Since May 2008 different groups of refugees from drop in centres in Newcastle have been coming weekly to enjoy the peace and beauty of Minsteracres and to look at ways in which they can become more involved. They have shown great interest in developing a fruit/vegetable garden. Their visits have been organized in collaboration with SCAN (Student Community in Action Newcastle).

Creating a fruit/vegetable garden is also part of our environmental policy to become more sustainable and self sufficient.

Minsteracres also owns 13 acres of parkland known as the Shrubbery This parkland is largely an arboretum containing several rare mature conifers and deciduous trees, hybrid and ponticum rhododendrons, laurel and holly. The Shrubbery fell into decline in the 20th century and the process of bringing it back into former glory began three years ago. A small team of committed volunteers is carefully exposing the hidden delights of the park.

Currently we are investigating the possibilities for renewable energy use for Minsteracres, and we are also looking into ways how we can save energy. We are very interested in contact with other retreat centres who are working with renewable energy and are self sufficient.

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www.minsteracres.org <<http://www.minsteracres.org>>

NEXT TIME: MILL HOUSE FARM – a small retreat centre in DEVON, and a discussion about Reed Bed Sewage/grey water systems. If any other retreat centres have any knowledge of this, or any questions, then please let us know.

If you are not interested in receiving these occasional letters please email info@arcworld.org