



Life R4EVER KENT

Event Summary

Networking visit to Sweden with LIFE Connects and Improve Aquatic LIFE



Date: 6–9 October 2025

Location: Malmö, Sweden and Skåne river sites

Led by: Karin Olsson, Project Manager LIFE Connects and Improve Aquatic LIFE

Number in attendance: 9

Purpose:

This international networking visit brought together the LIFE R4ever Kent team with Swedish counterparts from the LIFE Connects and Improve Aquatic LIFE projects. The aim was to share knowledge, compare approaches to river restoration and freshwater species recovery across projects and countries, and explore opportunities for cross-border learning and collaboration.



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Outcomes:



The visit began with a warm welcome and a series of presentations comparing how England and Sweden approach river restoration, mussel reintroductions, and project financing. This was, of course, interspersed with our team being introduced to the delight that is Swedish Fika – which we will definitely be continuing when we return home! Discussions highlighted key differences in legislation, regulatory frameworks, and funding mechanisms—offering valuable insights into how each country navigates constraints and opportunities.

Projects are taking very different approaches to mussel reintroductions, with the Swedish projects infesting fish *in situ* in the catchments with mussel glochidia and using modelling on mortality rates to infer release numbers, in contrast to the English approach of captive breeding, tagging and release. Our mussel experts across the projects Ben and Sebastian enjoyed some wonderfully lively discussions on the pros and cons of each approach, the individual constraints of different setups for mussel research as well as the considerations of differing river suitability all forming part of the decision on methodology. While LIFE R4ever Kent is focussed on the Freshwater Pearl Mussel only, the LIFE Connects and Improve Aquatic LIFE projects are working with (*Unio crassus*) mussels as well as *Margaritifera margaritifera*. A unique difference of Sweden's administrative system in Europe meaning that their plans have to be submitted through an Environmental Court instead of through local authorities or disparate regulatory bodies provided an interesting topic of conversation, yet despite the differing mechanisms it was striking how similar the considerations were in the planning stages, with the same application and permitting considerations and frustrations on speed, detail and complexity shared.

Monitoring across the projects was discussed and again had a striking similarity, despite the difference in project scale, with the Swedish projects considerably larger than LIFE R4ever Kent. With Improve Aquatic LIFE – as Europe's largest water conservation project - having 17 partners it was great to briefly meet the project's Finance Officers and discuss keeping on top of so many statements! Sourcing funding for match was also a great leveller, with budget cuts and public and government positivity towards nature restoration taking a similar backseat against concerns of rising energy prices and general cost of living in both countries.



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Day one ended with a wonderful meal at a local restaurant where both teams were able to relax and chat more informally and we finished ready to go out and about to see more of the work of our fantastic hosts.



watercourse.

The field excursion on day two was a true highlight. Travelling through the Skåne region, we visited a series of restoration sites that showcased the scale and ambition of Swedish river work. From the dramatic cliffs of Skärälid to the serene waters of Görarpsdammen, the scenery was nothing short of breathtaking. Crystal-clear rivers, vibrant autumn colours, and expertly restored habitats left a lasting impression. Sweden in autumn is truly beautiful, and we began at the Skärälid national park where we saw a beautiful fish passage Skärälid installed around an artificial lake barrier, designed to look like a natural winding stream blending seamlessly into the park. The beautiful autumn colours were supplemented by a plethora of mushrooms, while we enjoyed drinking fresh spring water before travelling further upstream to see where they had undertaken mussel releases. One key difference we noticed amongst the beauty is the difficulty Sweden has with invasive Signal crayfish, which abounded along the

The second site on our visit was to the former hydropower dam removed last year at Ebbarp on the River Rönne å. The sides of the dam were left in situ to retain the historic feature in the environment, with the middle removed following gradual lowering of the water level behind. The meandering river already looks wonderful, and is surrounded by startlingly quick regeneration, but there is still a need to raise the profile of bed to improve the slope gradient and flow rates. This visit was combined with more delicious Fika and a discussion on public attitudes to change in their environment.

The next three sites were to see dams on the River Rönne å due to be removed which are currently waiting on a permit (or permits, fingers crossed!) getting through the Swedish environmental courts – a delay which has required a prolongation on the project. Interestingly, the three dams had been purchased by the municipality to take down, as low income and low electricity production could be removed along with the barriers and instead swapped for ecotourism on a key salmon river. At the uppermost site in Forsmöllan we saw where the dam was still in situ but no longer in use, with a gorgeous old smithy and old bridge foundations over a dramatic stepped waterfall series. The project will build a new bridge to replace the walkway along the dam, as there will no longer be access across the river with the dam removal.

Then we had a quick stop at the second of the three dams, at the Klippan paper mill which is contesting the removal as they have an abstraction permit at the site. Despite the overhanging legal



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issues we were once again struck with the beauty of the site with beautiful bedrock and golden leaves.

We then stopped for lunch at a fantastically quirky rock bar, enjoying traditional Swedish venison stew with lingonberries and potatoes. This was accompanied with wonderful discussions of shared interests outside of the projects with talk about motorbikes, raising chickens, foraging mushrooms, growing pears and apples.

Our next stop was at the third future dam removal plan at Stackarp. There are plans to include a recreational park with access and the idea to bring more communities out into nature in the area of



land currently flooded behind the barrier. Worries about chromium in the concrete have led to a requirement to test. The results of this could significantly change the cost of removal, reminding us that new issues and concerns get thrown up all along the way when undertaking river restoration, and multiple plans to cover all eventualities should always be considered at any time. A highlight was seeing a Raven on the walk to the site, as the road had been locked off due to a recent theft of copper and oil from the old turbine. Again, the largest concern as with many of the other barrier removal projects was initially

siltation once the dams are removed, however for myself, the most striking difference between attitudes towards acceptable disturbance in the short term, in order to gain the best outcome for the SACs. While we are exceptionally risk averse in England, with Habitat Regulation Assessments often having mitigation written into them including stopping works if there is visible siltation until this clears, the Swedish projects were confident they could show that the large siltation movement caused by the barrier removal is only temporary and is an acceptable level of risk. Temporary being that it should be back below acceptable standards within three years. I believe that in order to accept greater restoration ambition in England we need to bear in mind this context of other countries and projects approaches, and could learn – within individual site constraints – to remember the speed of natural processes.

Our last stop was at Görapsdammen removal of the dam on the river Råån occurred earlier this year. The dam was installed to provide drinking water and the removal proved difficult as it had been undertaken in low flows. This had led to silt not flushing through the system, however, despite a lot of visible silt at the site for now, there was no appetite to remove it and it will be left to let nature do it over the next few years out to sea. We saw examples of swan, duck and Depressed Mussels and the new meandering river channel, which again had fantastic plant colonisation all along the reach with no intervention. The ethos to allow nature to find its own way to finish works was a wonderful connection between the projects, despite the difference in scale of initial works.



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Throughout the trip, the quality of professional networking was exceptional. Conversations flowed easily, ideas were exchanged freely, and new relationships were forged that will support future collaboration. The LIFE programme once again proved to be a powerful enabler of international partnership and shared learning.

We returned home inspired, informed, and energised—ready to apply new thinking to our work on the River Kent and Tributaries SSSI/SAC and beyond.

Written by: Morgan Barrie, Suze Southern and Ben King



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