



University Mini-BioBlitz Toolkit

About this toolkit

This toolkit is for University organisers that want to run BioBlitz events, and can also be used by students or community members that want to work with a university on a BioBlitz. It follows the format of the more detailed OPAL Guide to 'Running a BioBlitz', which it is designed to sit alongside.

The toolkit is based on the experience of six universities which ran Mini-BioBlitz events during autumn 2010, supported by vinspired students in partnership with the Bristol Natural History Consortium. The [University Mini-BioBlitz](#) case study contains further advice and tips (See section 12: Resources).

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1) What is a BioBlitz?

A BioBlitz is a race against the clock to record as many species as possible in a given area. A full BioBlitz lasts usually 24 hours, a Mini-BioBlitz for 3-4 hours. It is a great model for engaging students with local wildlife, conservation, hands-on learning, plus the myriad benefits associated with volunteering. It can unite your University in an activity that benefits not just students, but both the local environment and community.

2) Getting started – goals, resources, partnerships

Will a Mini-BioBlitz meet your goals?

Be clear on your priorities. The emphasis in a BioBlitz can be shifted towards biodiversity, public engagement, student volunteering, or partnership development. For example, the Mini-BioBlitz at Exeter in 2010 was primarily a public engagement event. At the University of East Anglia the

BioBlitz acted as a launch event for a wider campus conservation project. At the University of the West of England the focus was on developing skills of students.

“Aims - Simply to engage students, develop their surveying, identification and media skills and to present them with an opportunity to learn firsthand from experts. To learn the practical side of science/biology rather than just the theory.” (UWE Mini-BioBlitz event co-ordinator)

“The project gives students the ability to contribute to conservation of the environment where they live and study, and engaged them with the responsibility to help look after this and learn more, spreading the word to other students.” (UEA Mini-BioBlitz organiser)

Table: Summary of what a BioBlitz can offer for different stakeholders

Students	Universities	Community organisers
volunteer on a succinct, exciting event	develop partnerships with local and national organisations	Universities can be a useful source of expertise, equipment and other resources
develop a broad range of skills for personal development	develop capacity for future student-led volunteering projects	Universities can be prestigious partners that raise the profile of an event
have fun, meet like-minded people and experts	raise public profile locally and nationally	students can offer valuable assistance, enthusiasm and insights that help to create a vibrant and diverse event
possibly count towards degree course accreditation	provides healthy and sociable volunteering opportunities for students and staff	
enhancement of CV	increase the number/variety of students volunteering	
mix positively with the wider community	foster better community relations	provide safe opportunity for diverse people to mix
possible increase in interest in biodiversity	puts biodiversity higher on the university agenda	possible increase in interest in biodiversity
Make a positive contribution to biodiversity and sustainable development.	Make a positive contribution to biodiversity and sustainable development.	Make a positive contribution to biodiversity and sustainable development.

Be clear at the start what information you will need to collect for evaluation purposes, and how you will evaluate the impacts of your BioBlitz.

Resources

Money for information pack, publicity, refreshments, possibly equipment hire/purchase and travel costs

Dedicated university **staff time** is needed, often with one co-ordinator and other staff specialists. Previous University Mini-BioBlitzes involved 1-20 staff members, plus student volunteers, with an average of 5-10 full working days for a 3 hour event.

When first holding a BioBlitz cross-departmental working and the development of partnerships requires a considerable investment of time. Begin planning well in advance to ensure that support of senior managers can be gained. This can pre-empt potential difficulties.

“Get support from the senior management and buy in from the top and then work up from the bottom. This made it easier to persuade middle managers (who are always the most difficult) to engage.” (University Mini-BioBlitz organiser)

You will need **partnerships** within the University (Estates management; logistics like insurance, health and safety, first aid; access; student societies; student and academic faculties; careers service; volunteering). External partners such as your Local Record Office, community groups, schools, wildlife and conservation groups, naturalists, local authority, and museums will also be invaluable.

3) Planning checklist

A minimum lead in time of three months is recommended for a Mini-BioBlitz. The planning checklist in the OPAL guide gives 6 months lead in time for a larger event.

Involve academics from the start

Learning from events in 2010 showed that this is key to a successful Mini-BioBlitz. Contact them through their faculty. They are more likely to get involved if there is a celebrity naturalist, if the event has a high media profile, and if the BioBlitz is not on a Saturday. Academics can be key proponents of the BioBlitz to their students and other staff members.

Recruit a student event co-ordinator

Another essential champion is a student who has participated already in a BioBlitz or who is enthusiastic, who can act as event co-ordinator. Many University Mini-BioBlitzes in 2010 were successfully co-organised by university staff working alongside a student event co-ordinator (see University Mini-BioBlitz). This:

- reduces the workload on the university organizer
- makes best use of student expertise
- can enhance recruitment of student volunteers, and
- offers an opportunity for skills development.

It can sometimes be a fine line to tread with student volunteering between fairly firm hand-holding at the start of a project, to gentle support in a later more student-led stage.

4) Choosing a site, date and duration for your Mini-BioBlitz

When?

Timing is all important. October and Mid May-September are not attractive to students. Bad weather will deter many, whilst warm weather will increase participation from humans and non-humans alike. Saturdays will need an extra hook to get people involved. Realistically, avoiding holidays and exam clashes for key student groups, a period between late March to mid May can work.

There may be other drivers for when to organise a BioBlitz. It may link in with a wider university/local sustainable development or conservation campaign, or it could configure as part of a summer or Easter field trip.

Where?

On campus is good, depending on the variety of habitats (woodland, grassland, hedges etc).

- Have the event in a prominent location, easily accessible by public transport and with parking. Define your area clearly.
- Have a building or facilities nearby which can house a Base Camp with microscopes/recording equipment etc. Tents/gazebos are also frequently erected, but without adjacent buildings, tents can get very busy.
- Have toilets nearby, or hire portable ones.
- Hire a generator if you do not have power lines or extension cables.

How long for?

Keep it simple, short and sweet.

5) Base camp

Leave plenty of time for setting up on the day.

You can set up displays and have talks at the Base Camp.



UEA gazebo by the Broad with displays.

6) Recruiting volunteers and specialists

See **3) Planning Checklist** for recruiting academics and student event co-ordinator.

You will also need to contact local naturalists with expertise on certain animal/plant types.

Student volunteer roles

For a Mini-BioBlitz there are at least **four main roles** for student volunteers. It's good to have clearly defined student roles, writing a brief description if necessary with deadlines for key activities. You can vary the roles to appeal to students from different faculties.

- I. **Pre-event Volunteers** are useful for helping with the logistics prior to the event. Besides the student event co-ordinator volunteers can be responsible for **equipment** (ordering gazebos, collecting equipment), and in **logistics/liaison** with other volunteers such as academics and naturalists.

- II. **Media Volunteers.** Recruit your media team a few months before the Mini-BioBlitz so that they can plan how to promote the event (see **9) Publicity**). Media volunteers on the day will be in charge of collecting in the species record forms, and managing the social media. They will take photographs and make film clips during the event.
- III. **Naturalists** will be crucial in helping to find and identify species within the specified site and to engage the public in wildlife identification and recording.
- IV. **Guides/Stewards** are more general volunteers that can have various roles. Get them to change roles on the day for variety:
 - Assist Naturalists by sharing knowledge and helping to identify species (at least 2 guides assist 1 Naturalist with their group)
 - Sign in and out the equipment
 - Hand out flyers around the site to engage the public
 - Meet and greet the public at Base Camp
 - Ensure the group surveys leave Base Camp on time, with all survey forms and recording sheets
 - Help the public look at species under microscopes at Base Camp
 - Work with media volunteers on mapping and data entry to record species
 - Help with set-up and pack-down of the event

Recruiting Student Volunteers

If you are a University holding a BioBlitz event with purely student volunteers you could try recruiting them through the following channels:

- Contact students on courses related to biosciences, conservation or ecology; media courses, photography, video and arts; potentially other courses such as science communication, community development, event management, society and ethics, and sustainable development. Ask lecturers/other academics to mention it to their students. Give a brief presentation at the start of a lecture, or use group email lists.
- Attract students at Fresher's events and with campus-wide media (such as Blackboard)
- Use Social Media to recruit (full details can be found in the University BioBlitz Social Media Guide).
- Involve the Students Union and Student Union Reps.
- Approach any student societies that may be interested (People and Planet, Oxfam, bioscience, environmental science, climate change, and religious/interfaith groups).
- Approach any volunteering department or public engagement unit your university might have. This could include student accreditation programmes for volunteering such as the Exeter Award or York Award, or actual course accreditation as in the [Manchester Leadership Programme](#). This is a great opportunity to join the volunteering team with departmental staff, and can strengthen internal collaboration.



Marketing the event

If you are a University marketing your event internally, there are a number of ways you can attract on-the-day student and staff participants:

- Through lecturers/other academics mentioning it to students and staff
- Email via relevant Society and Group mailing lists
- Place posters/flyers around campus and in staff common rooms

- Use Blackboard and other central University media
- Create a Facebook Group within your University, or feed into pre-existing groups. See the [BioBlitz Social Media Toolkit](#) for ideas on use of Facebook, Twitter and Blogs.
- Attend Campus events such as Fresher's Week, marketplaces, careers fairs or other forums where students will be able to explore the event opportunities
- Put an article in any university newsletters that exist
- Liaise with public engagement, careers service and volunteering teams at your University who may already have marketing strategies.
- Get a 'name' on board. Sometimes the best attraction for students can be to get involved with a famous alumnus who might share an interest in the BioBlitz. Exeter University alumni Nick Baker (above) lead to over 100 student volunteers getting involved.
- Request a few student volunteers engage with people face to face and ask them to participate.

Involving students that are passionate about conservation and biodiversity, encouraging them to talk to other students about BioBlitz is THE best marketing tool. People will often volunteer their time when they are asked, so ask them. Convince them that they will have a good time, and do something of benefit.

7) Recording survey results

Working in partnership with your Local Records Centre will help to ensure that you collect and record accurate data on species you find. This is essential if you seek to have some lasting impact in terms of biodiversity. It can also help you to connect with University and local authority sustainable development strategies.

The section in the OPAL guide is great on this, with ideas for standardised recording forms and downloadable guides for recording wildlife. If you are working with schools, you will need to adapt your recording forms for use with the appropriate age group.

For identification purposes, your media team can also take photos of finds and upload them to [iSpot](#), a website with online community which can help you identify what you've found. You will need a simple spread sheet to record finds. Naturalists and your Local Records Centre can advise you on this.

Make sure you tell people how your results are going to be used. People like to know how their time and energy is contributing towards making a difference.

8) Health, safety and related documents

See the OPAL toolkit and website for this and downloadable resources. In a University bureaucracy may mean things take a bit longer, but there are advantages in that many resources may already be in place such as Public Liability Insurance/first aid cover/accident and incident procedures.

9) Publicity

A BioBlitz is a wonderful occasion to generate positive public profile. Promotion does need planning in advance to be effective.

Getting a celeb involved will generally need to be arranged early on. There may be other hooks – local festivals, special events, National XXXX Day or Year of XXXXX – which a BioBlitz can build on.

Newspaper article submission and press releases need to be timed to make sure you hit their deadlines – talk to the University marketing department or the publication itself about this.

Quarterlies have deadlines well in advance of the actual event (February for May/June for example) so your media team need to be on the ball.

Know who you want to communicate with, and the best avenues to do so, and target your message. Use social media, word of mouth, and more traditional media such as posters and flyers in community venues, press releases, newspapers and listings magazines, local online event listings or social websites as well as your University website, local radio and TV in the run up to the event. Some useful websites that may cover your area for events/social groups include www.gumtree.com; www.myvillage.com; www.meetup.com.

List your BioBlitz event on the Bristol Natural History Consortium website, and contact them for promotional resources including banners.

Get the Students' Union, student societies, faculties, the volunteer centre and local organisations to give a final push via email a few days before the event to recruit. Share information on the day with flyers to passers by too. People will often spontaneously participate.

There are details on how Canterbury Christchurch University publicised their Mini-BioBlitz in the [University Mini-BioBlitz case study](#).

10) Ideas for activities

Pre-event liaison with students

- Avoid sending out too much information beforehand, and when you do, follow up emails.
- Brief students at a pre-event meeting and again early on the day itself, checking in with them with updates and for any questions.

Activities on the day could include guided walks, subject dependent on your location and the expertise of naturalists. University Mini-BioBlitzes have included daytime walks on:

- fungal foray
- freshwater invertebrates
- flowering plants
- woodlice, spiders and centipedes
- terrestrial invertebrates
- general walk including birdsong.

Evening activities can include moth trapping, and bats.

At UEA the Grounds Manager and Ecology Lecturer lead tours of the wildlife and conservation sites around the campus.

Activities with school children may need to be tailored for safety reasons, but pond dipping and log turning are generally popular.

Organise talks by local experts that link to wider agendas, such as the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England, or a city-wide sustainability initiative. A lecturer could share how the wildlife surveys can build up important knowledge about the different species of animal, bird, insects and plants found at the site.

The UEA Mini-BioBlitz event gave information about ongoing conservation volunteering opportunities on Wednesday afternoons, and signed up students.

11) At the end of the BioBlitz and after the event

Evaluation does not have to be form-filling, although this helps to gather quality information. Reflective sessions can really assist students in getting the most learning from a volunteering experience, and will give insights in how to adapt your processes for future activities. Use a variety of simple evaluation techniques, such as:

- Have a short debrief session at the end of the BioBlitz with volunteers.
- Put up some flip charts at Base Camp – ‘What did you enjoy at the BioBlitz?’, ‘What wasn’t so enjoyable?’, ‘What can we do differently another time?’ Leave marker pens so people can add comments.
- Have a 1 sided A4 feedback form with a box for collection. Include an email address so people can email back comments if they don’t have time to complete the form on the day.
- Have a focus group feedback session when offering volunteers refreshments at the end of the day, or shortly after the event. Have a few questions about skills developed etc. This can also be a recognition and thank you event.
- Email out key volunteers (naturalists, academics) for their comments, or informally interview them.
- A BioBlitz could be a good project for a social research methodology student.

Remember to share your species data via blog, email, newspaper and newsletters, and tell people how results will be used. Faculties may have their own e-newsletters. Providing information on other volunteering opportunities at the same time will help to keep enthusiasm going after the event.

The University of West of England suggested that it would be good to have a certificate of participation for students to put on their CV.

12) Resources and links

[OPAL \(Open Air Laboratories\) BioBlitz web pages](#) including OPAL, Natural History Museum and Marine Biological Association Guide to ‘Running a BioBlitz’, case studies and guidelines for recording and sharing your BioBlitz results.

[Bristol Natural History Consortium](#), for advice, promotional materials, banners, and contacts on the BioBlitz network.

[iSpot](#) for species identification.

The [National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#) (NCCPE), for information about the [vinspired students](#) project.

Links to other useful documents on www.publicengagement.ac.uk:

- [University Mini-BioBlitz case study](#)
- [Canterbury Christ Church University publicity mini-case study](#)
- [Bristol BioBlitz case study](#)
- [Working with Local Communities](#)
- [Working with Student Volunteers](#)