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The Green Waste Project: a reassurance

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On the 26th February we were kindly invited by the NCMD to present an update on the project we are both running to record ‘contaminated’ green waste. During a very productive discussion and dialogue in Northampton it became clear that a number of misconceptions about the project exist. At the invitation of The Searcher’s editor, we’re taking this opportunity to present our case again and to address the concerns raised about the project by the detecting community.

What is the project about?

For some time detectorists have recognised that contaminants (mainly aluminium foil and the like) within green waste (organic rubbish that has been composted and spread on arable land) have been interfering with detecting up and down the land. More recently it has become apparent that other (in this case ferrous) contaminants are having a negative impact on geophysical surveys carried out by archaeologists.

The project is a collaboration between Newcastle University and the public (including detectorists, archaeologists and others) to record fields that have had contaminated green waste spread on them. To this end a website and an app have been developed that allows members of the public to simply and anonymously record fields where they have encountered this issue.

What is the project trying to achieve?

The recycling industry and others are attempting to dismiss the problem of contamination in green waste as a matter of little importance. They argue that the tightest regulation in Europe means that this is a small-scale problem caused by a few ‘rogue operators’.

The project is attempting to demonstrate that contaminants within green waste is a national problem. To this end we are seeking data to demonstrate that the issue has been encountered up and down the country. This will provide us with a body of evidence that we will be able to present to the recycling industry, government agencies and organisations that might support further action.

If I use this app will my farmer get into trouble?

No, absolutely not. We have no interest or mechanism for identifying farmers and no interest or desire to cause any problems for them or the detecting community. We encourage all users of the app to get the landholder’s permission before reporting fields.

The farmer is worried that his land will be classed as ‘contaminated’

Contaminants within green waste (ie inorganic matter) will not lead to any piece of land being classed as ‘contaminated’. This problem is large scale littering and litter does not lead to land being classed as contaminated. Contaminated land is soil contaminated by industrial processes with petrochemicals, heavy metals, asbestos and other nasty stuff. These soak into the soil and can potentially present a risk to health. The material in green waste does not do this and does not pose a risk to health. At present no expert in contamination would class a field spread with ‘contaminated green waste’ as contaminated land. There is no danger that land will be classed as ‘contaminated’ as a consequence of this project. Please show your farmer this article if they are worried.
Why haven’t you discussed this project with farmers?

We are completely willing to discuss the project and its aims with the farming community. The problem with green waste is in the public domain: a question was asked in the House of Commons about this issue in 2012 and several million people watched a BBC Countryfile programme that covered the issue. More recently a farmer wrote a response to an article we published in the magazine British Archaeology. We do feel that it would be better to approach the farming community once we have a clearer idea of the spread of the problem and evidence to support our claims.

Aren’t you collecting personal data? Is this legal?

The app and its data collection has been reviewed by the University’s legal team and Information Security Officer. It does not collect any personal data and we have no interest in identifying any individuals or sensitive data. The app is thus legal and operates within the law. The project has undergone and been passed by the University’s ethical review process.

Won’t you publish maps that will reveal where individuals have been detecting?

It is true that we hope to generate distribution maps at a national level to show the spread of contaminated green waste by using a colour coded system for regional levels. The scale of these will be such that it would be impossible to identify individual locations. Most of our data will be presented at the county or postcode level. We may also publish maps showing specific regions. Where we do this we will anonymise geographical information to protect the areas. This will involve removing grid references, placenames and referring to locations simply as ‘a village in Norfolk’ etc.

Who owns the data?

The data has been collected as part of a Newcastle University project. The University owns the data.

Won’t you, or the university, share the data with third parties?

No. There is no third party involvement in the project and we and the University will not share the raw data with any third parties.

Why are you asking detectorists to participate in this project?

The project is aimed at any member of the public willing to participate. This includes detectorists, archaeologists and others. Theoretically it would be possible to collect data without involving detectorists but this would involve a huge investment of resources (probably in excess of a £1,000,000) to run a national project. We are unlikely to gain such resources without a pilot study or proof of concept project.

Detectorists are encountering this problem on a daily basis and having been talking about this issue for a number of years. This is an opportunity for the detecting community to work with university researchers to map the problem. More importantly metal detectorists are the only individuals out there in the field on their hands and knees working through the detritus. This means that readers of this magazine are uniquely placed to work with us.

Why is the app anonymous?

We did not want to collect any personal or identifying information. More importantly we did not want users or famers to feel that they could be contacted or ‘tracked down’ by the project.
When I upload a report the app asks me to agree that any photos will be in the public domain?

We hope that users will upload images of contaminants they have recovered from fields. We might wish to publish some of these images in the future. In order to do so we need to be able to demonstrate that the images are not copyrighted. We can only do this and maintain the anonymity of users by insisting that images be in the public domain. Any user who feels uncomfortable about this should not upload their images.

Can’t individuals log false reports?

The app is essentially a survey tool. Like any survey participants can lie (although we have some safeguards in place to identify and weed out false reports). The project works on trust and is based on many similar so-called ‘citizen science’ projects. Think, for example, of the RSPB Big Garden Bird Watch which takes place every year. This might ask respondents to report the birds that land in their garden at a specific time of day.

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Contaminants in green waste are causing detectorists and archaeologists problems. Both groups are interested in the past and both groups have, in the national scheme of things, small voices. By working together our voices will be louder. The next step in the debate about green waste is to move the argument beyond anecdote. Readers of The Searcher know that this is a national problem. Help us to demonstrate this and build up a body of evidence that we can use to convince government, regulators and the recycling industry that there is a genuine problem out there in the British Countryside.

You can access the web based reporting form and the Android and IOS Apps by following this link: http://ceg-research.ncl.ac.uk/greenwasteproject/