

## News Release

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### **Nature lovers can now get involved with citizen science across the United Kingdom**

People of all ages can now contribute to scientific research in their local area on everything from invasive species to environmental quality, through the Open Air Laboratories programme (OPAL).

The programme, led by Imperial College London, has been inspiring communities in England to discover, enjoy and protect their local environment since 2007. More than 850,000 people have already taken part and today OPAL officially rolls out across the whole of the UK.

A range of organisations, including universities, wildlife groups and museums, are working in partnership to deliver the programme's citizen science activities, including six national environment surveys.

Citizen scientists have already used lichens to identify areas affected by air pollution and discovered that earthworm diversity is high in back gardens. The expansion of OPAL's surveys now means scientists will be able to track the spread of invasive species, such as the damaging Chalara ash dieback disease, as well as find out more about the differences between urban and rural biodiversity.

Alys Fowler, nature lover and gardening correspondent, is urging people of all ages and abilities to explore nature with the OPAL programme. She said: "OPAL is a great way to find out about the nature right on your doorstep – wherever you live in the UK".

"It's really easy to get started; you don't need any previous knowledge or experience and it doesn't matter if you live in the countryside or a city. Best of all, OPAL resources are free and available to download from [www.opalexplornature.org](http://www.opalexplornature.org) right now, so you don't have any excuses not to get involved!"

OPAL Director Dr David Slawson said: "We are very pleased to be able to roll out OPAL in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland today. Our activities have been very popular already, with more than 850,000 people taking part and submitting more than 50,000 records about their local environment.

"Not only are people learning more about their environment, but this valuable data is helping scientists learn a great deal about biodiversity in our country, especially in areas they would



never normally be able to study, such as back gardens. We hope many more people will join in, explore nature and contribute to our knowledge of the environment across the whole of the UK.”

The expansion has been made possible by a £3 million grant from the Big Lottery Fund. This comes on top of £15 million of lottery funding awarded to the project between 2007 and 2012.

A number of local events are being held to mark OPAL’s expansion across the UK, where people have been getting hands-on with nature and getting a taste of the surveys. People can find out about other OPAL events in their area at

<http://www.opalexplornature.org/OPALActivities>

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Notes to editor

1. The Open Air Laboratories (OPAL) network, led by Imperial College London, is a UK-wide partnership initiative that inspires communities to discover, enjoy and protect their local environments through citizen science-based activities. OPAL began in 2007, operating across England and funded by a Big Lottery Fund – Changing Spaces grant. Since January 2014, the programme has expanded to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland thanks to a further award from the Big Lottery Fund’s Supporting UK-wide Great Ideas programme. For more information, please visit [www.opalexplornature.org](http://www.opalexplornature.org) or follow us on Twitter @OPALNature
2. A full list of OPAL partners can be found at <http://www.opalexplornature.org/PartnersandProjects>
3. The Big Lottery Fund (BLF) supports the aspirations of people who want to make life better for their communities across the UK. BLF are responsible for giving out 40% of the money raised by the National Lottery and invest over £650 million a year in projects big and small in health, education, environment and charitable purposes. Since June 2004 BLF have awarded over £6.5billion to projects that make a difference to people and communities in need, from early years intervention to commemorative travel funding for World War Two veterans. Since the National Lottery began in 1994, £33 billion has been raised and more than 450,000 grants awarded.
4. For more information, contact David Slawson or Poppy Lakeman Fraser on [opal@imperial.ac.uk](mailto:opal@imperial.ac.uk) or phone 020 7594 9295.