

Scientists dig deep for UK soil research

BY KEITH FINDLAY

Scientists at the James Hutton Institute are leading a UK-wide soil sampling campaign to help a major European project.

It is hoped the Echo scheme will collect a total of 16,500 samples across the continent.

The initiative has prompted a search for Echo “ambassadors” in Scotland to help complete the mission.

Ambassadors will attend an informative workshop before they set out on their quest to spread the word about the importance of soil health.

And they will be trying to encourage communities to collect samples from their area.

As one of the biggest carbon stores on our planet, the earth beneath our feet is vital to ecosystems.

Karolina Trdlicova, citizen science co-ordinator on the Echo project at the Hutton, said: “Soil is hugely important as a foundation for our food systems, to nature and even for storing carbon.

“While there’s increasing awareness of the health of our rivers and air, the importance of soil, this amazing, non-renewable resource, is often overlooked.

“That means it is all too often becoming degraded, with potentially detrimental consequences, and we need to protect and nurture its health and the incredible life in it.

“Through this project, we hope to build on the institute’s renowned expertise in earth sciences.

“By involving the public directly, we can not only analyse our unique properties of Scottish landscapes but also help build the databases that will underpin future research and understanding.”

The Hutton is home to Scotland’s National Soil Archive, which contains more than 60,000 soil samples dating back to 1934.

As one of 16 partners on the Echo project, the institute will also conduct extensive DNA analysis of Scottish and wider European soils, helping to

unearth the range of life within each sample.

The Aberdeen-based North East Scotland Climate Action Network and North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership (NESBiP), a local partnership hosted by the Hutton, has been promoting the Echo recruitment call.

NESBiP biodiversity co-ordinator Abbie Ferrar said: “People frequently overlook soil ecosystems while considering biodiversity, instead focusing on the quantity of pollinators, wildflowers or birds. Yet healthy soil life is crucial for those flowers and pollinators to thrive.

“Increased soil biodiversity, such as the presence of mycorrhizas (symbiotic associations between plant roots and beneficial fungi), and low soil fertility have been found to increase pollinator visits to flowers and reduce the prevalence of thick, coarse grasses.”

Environmental charity Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB) has also shared its support by hosting a Q&A session about Echo’s



mission.

Juliette Camburn, senior officer for community initiatives at KSB, said: “Healthy soil is essential for anyone involved in community growing, and understanding what makes soil healthy is key.”

To get involved, visit echosoil.eu/become-an-echo-ambassador



DOWN TO EARTH: Echo project co-ordinator Karolina Trdlcova takes a soil sample.

