

Our Position on Nature Connection, Outdoor Learning and Education

This document outlines how we think engaging with wild places supports learning and education across the devolved administrations of each of the countries of the UK.

Trust position

1. The Trust believes that everyone, particularly children and young people, should benefit from nature. One proven way to achieve benefits is through regular, relevant and meaningful experiences in wild places as part of, and beyond, formal education.¹
2. The Trust aims to inspire people to engage with and advocate for wild places. The Trust's engagement and education work includes people of all ages and contributes to lifelong learning and employability skills.

Policy context

3. Human wellbeing is linked to the natural environment in myriad ways.² Empirical research consistently indicates that contact with the natural world provides multiple benefits for human health and wellbeing, including improvements to physical health (through increased physical activity) and improvements to psychological and social wellbeing (such as reduced stress and anxiety, increased happiness, self-esteem and resilience).³ Notably, growing evidence supports the view that spending time in nature is an important childhood experience that promotes personal development, as it has clear positive impacts on children's cognitive processes, academic performance, interest in school, social and emotional skills, and civic interest and engagement.⁴ Time spent discovering, exploring and being active in nature and wild places also supports a child's right to play.⁵
4. Yet several aspects of our contemporary lifestyles are associated with reduced contact with nature, especially in urban areas. It is often deprived neighbourhoods, communities and minorities that are most impacted by reduced access to quality greenspace and, compared to more affluent areas, are less likely to visit natural environments.⁶ In fact, fewer than a quarter of children regularly use their local "patch of nature", compared to over half of all adults when they were children, and fewer

¹ Evidence suggests that nature connection, to be impactful, needs to occur on a regular basis. See 'Finding Nature' research blog: 'There is little to no evidence to suggest that brief one-off activities have any impact on nature connection. Sustained increases in nature connectedness were observed when people were invited to engage with nature on a daily or more regular basis.' <https://findingnature.org.uk/2022/10/04/how-to-improve-nature-connectedness/>

² Nature Connectedness Research Group, University of Derby (see esp. Charles et al. (2018) under publications): <https://www.derby.ac.uk/research/about-our-research/centres-groups/nature-connectedness-research-group/>

³ Bratman et al. (2019), 'Nature and Mental Health: An Ecosystem Service Perspective': <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/7/eaax0903>

⁴ Gill (2014), 'The Benefits of Children's Engagement with Nature': <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.24.2.0010.pdf?seq=1>

⁵ Article 31 of the UN Convention on the rights of the child is the right to play: 'Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities'

⁶ National Trust (2020), 'New Research Shows the Need for Urban Greenspace': <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/new-research-shows-the-need-for-urban-green-space>

than one in ten children regularly play in wild places.⁷ This decline is of great concern, not only in terms of the impact on children's health and wellbeing, but also in terms of future nature conservation. Research⁸ suggests that people with a greater connection to nature are more likely to behave positively towards the environment, climate, wildlife and habitats, and the recent State of Nature report clearly stresses the importance of increased protection of wildlife and wild places across the UK.⁹

Why we care/relevance to the Trust

5. The John Muir Trust believes that opportunities that enable people to connect with nature can support learning and personal development. Learning outdoors can be fun, adventurous, exhilarating, challenging and creative. It can offer formative experiences that inspire confidence, appreciation, values and responsibility for wild places. Moreover, it can take place in a broad spectrum of settings and timeframes; from spontaneous school ground activities to expeditions in National Parks, from field study trips to residential at outdoor centres.
6. One of the Trust's main engagement initiatives, the John Muir Award¹⁰, is used by schools, colleges, outdoor and community learning centres and youth groups around the UK to support and add value to educational outcomes for people of all backgrounds. The Award provides a rich context for teaching and learning outdoors and encourages long-term sustained engagement. It is flexible in place, pace and activities, promoting inclusive approaches with an emphasis on shared learning, participation and equity¹¹.
7. In addition to the John Muir Award, we provide people with opportunities to experience and learn about wild places through the Wild Space Visitor Centre in Pitlochry, conservation work parties, work placements and internships, guided walks, Local Member Groups, a Junior Ranger Programme¹² and supporting new land management course development.
8. We support, influence and amplify nature connection benefits through networks. Specifically, Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, UK National Parks Learning and Engagement Officers Group, the National Outdoors For All Working Group (facilitated by Natural England), Wildlife and Countryside LINK and local networks such as the Peak District Educators Group.

⁷ Natural England (2009), 'Childhood and Nature: A Survey on Changing Relationships with Nature': <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5853658314964992>

⁸ BBC (2016), 'How Nature Is Good for Our Health and Happiness': <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20160420-how-nature-is-good-for-our-health-and-happiness>

⁹ 'State of Nature 2023': <https://stateofnature.org.uk/>

¹⁰ John Muir Award and Curriculum (England): <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/about/resources/499-john-muir-award-and-the-curriculum-england>,

John Muir Award and Curriculum for Excellence (Scotland):

<https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/about/resources/356-john-muir-award-and-the-curriculum-for-excellence>,

John Muir Award and Curriculum (Wales): being worked up in 2020

¹¹ John Muir Trust (2020), 'Closing the Gap: How the John Muir Award Helps Raise Attainment in Scotland': https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/assets/000/004/473/Closing_the_Gap_2020_original.pdf?1592819739

¹² Our Junior Ranger Programme gives young people living near Trust properties an opportunity to learn about the land on their doorstep and develop knowledge and life skills to take on in their personal development. Participation also leads to achieving a John Muir Award.

Policy solution

9. The John Muir Trust believes that opportunities for learning about wild places and nature should be available throughout every person's life. We wish to see a commitment to inclusive outdoor learning for all children, young people and adults, so that people understand, enjoy and can advocate for the importance of wild places. We would like to see each of the UK administrations provide:
- a) **All children, young people and adults with access to frequent, immersive and progressive experiences of wild places and nature.**
 - b) **Learning outside the classroom for all learners and embedded into the curriculum in each of the devolved UK administrations.**
 - c) **Educational establishments across the UK with support to promote understanding of and engagement with nature conservation and sustainable development in accordance with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals¹³.**
10. We acknowledge that the policy context differs for each of the countries in the UK, and as such we expect approaches to education to differ regionally.
- **Scotland** – The Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland embeds Outdoor Learning approaches, global citizenship, children's rights and sustainable development education as an entitlement for all learners through the National Performance Framework¹⁴. This sets a leading example for administrations in England and Wales. We would like to see Education Scotland continue its commitment to Outdoor Learning through Learning for Sustainability and support for teachers to provide high quality learning opportunities which support equity in education and raise attainment.¹⁵
 - **England** – The Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto¹⁶ and Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework¹⁷, which emphasises a broad and rich curriculum with a range of extracurricular activities that contribute to effective SMSC (Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural) education, support the need and value of learning outside the classroom. The 25 Year Environment Plan encourages children to be close to nature, both in and out of school, and sets out initiatives designed to inspire and support outdoor activities, particularly where a child has no access to a family garden¹⁸. The Glover Landscapes Review, which calls for "a night under the stars in a national landscape for every child", also recognises the value of experiences for children with an emphasis on experiences in designated landscapes (the subject of the review).¹⁹ The

¹³ The UN's Sustainable Development Goals: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

¹⁴ Scotland's National Performance Framework: <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/>

¹⁵ For how the John Muir Award helps to raise attainment and support equity in education see the 'Closing the Gap' report: https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/assets/000/001/121/Closing_the_Gap_2020_original_original.pdf?1610737908

¹⁶ Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (2006), 'Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto': <https://www.lotc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/G1.-LOtC-Manifesto.pdf>

¹⁷ Ofsted (2019), 'Education Inspection Framework': <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework>

¹⁸ Defra (2018), 'A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment': <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

¹⁹ [DEFRA - Landscapes Review - Final Report 2019 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/421111/DEFRA_-_Landscapes_Review_-_Final_Report_2019_(publishing.service.gov.uk)) (see page 85)

Department for Education's Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy²⁰ includes the aim of 'preparing all young people for a world impacted by climate change through learning and practical experience'.²¹ We would like to see the Department for Education ensure that every school-aged learner in England has regular access to high-quality learning outside the classroom and a chance, as part of their formal education, to experience a wild place.

- **Wales** – Outdoor Learning Wales²² (a national network facilitated by Natural Resources Wales) aims to increase the understanding, appreciation and sustainable management of natural resources in relation to Wales; the Outdoor Education Bill²³ aims to 'establish a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure that all young people receiving maintained education are provided with the opportunity to experience residential Outdoor Education', while the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015²⁴ puts in place seven wellbeing goals that all public bodies in Wales must work towards. These initiatives provide an ideal opportunity for incorporating outdoor learning into the curriculum for Wales.²⁵ The Trust has produced resources to link the criteria of the John Muir Award to the curriculum's four purposes and areas of learning and experience.
- **Northern Ireland** – the John Muir Award is being delivered in Northern Ireland through relationships with educational organisations there. We believe our educational resources explore universal themes and can be adapted to suit the National Curriculum of each of the UK's four nations. The Trust is committed to supporting anyone in Northern Ireland who would like to complete a John Muir Award.

Covid-19 and education recovery

11. Covid-19 created stress and uncertainty across society. Multiple lockdowns highlighted multiple barriers faced by some communities more than others, including inequities in health, access to outdoor space and digital connectivity. These barriers have had a sustained impact on education and learning. As part of education recovery in the post-pandemic years, there is a growing awareness of the role that outdoor learning approaches can have in adapting to new ways of learning and teaching. Maximising use of outdoor spaces, encouraging nature connection and drawing on existing good practice can help personal development, meet curriculum outcomes and support the health and wellbeing of educators, learners and their families.²⁶

Publication approved by Trustees: December 2023

Date last reviewed: October 2023

²⁰ UK's Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-and-climate-change-strategy>

²¹ UK Government's Department for Education Policy Paper, Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-and-climate-change-strategy>

²² Outdoor Learning Wales: www.walescouncilforoutdoorlearning.org

²³ The Outdoor Education Bill was introduced to the Senedd in 2022: <https://senedd.wales/media/1nsigtqb/outdoor-education-wales-bill-em.pdf>. [Public consultation took place during 2023.](#)

²⁴ The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act: <https://futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/>

²⁵ The 'Curriculum for Wales' went live for all primary schools and most Year 7 secondary pupils in September 2022: <https://research.senedd.wales>

²⁶ John Muir Award and Education Recovery (Scotland): <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/about/resources/1958-john-muir-award-and-education-recovery-scotland>