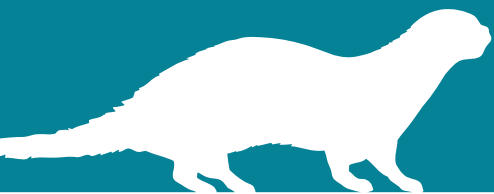




The
Wildlife
Trusts

A Vision for Nature in Schools

Giving every child the best start in life



Introduction

Every child has the right to learn in and about nature. Taking learning outdoors benefits children's mental health and develops a deeper appreciation for the environment and their role in taking care of it. Building a lasting connection with nature in childhood shapes our adult lives and attitudes towards wildlife, climate change. This enables us to make informed, sustainable choices in how we live.

Time spent in nature is consistently associated with better health¹. At least 30 minutes in a natural environment is associated with lower depression and blood pressure, and increased frequency of time spent in nature is associated with greater social cohesion and physical activity². Improvements in self-esteem and mood have also been observed after just five minutes of exercise in a natural environment³.

But today, too few children enjoy and benefit from being close to high-quality natural spaces in their daily lives, and their mental health, wellbeing and academic performance is suffering as a result. This is why The Wildlife Trusts are working to embed nature within formal education and provide more opportunities for children to learn in and about the natural world.

We would like to see **a statutory requirement for access to and engagement with nature within all formal education settings** by:

- **making all schools the equitable place where every child experiences nature** through developing biodiverse school grounds where nature and children thrive together. We also want schools to be provided with the kit and equipment needed to get children outdoors.
- **preparing all teachers to teach, guide, and challenge misconceptions about nature and climate**, ensuring children have access to sources of information and data they can trust and rely on.
- **treating the nature and climate crises as authentic societal challenges**, and fundamental to the British values they learn at school.

Make schools the equitable place for children to experience nature

School grounds should provide safe, high-quality spaces for children to learn and play in nature, alongside providing essential havens and safe spaces for wildlife to thrive.

Evidence⁴ shows that school grounds improvements that are small in scale, easily maintained, and designed to be sustainable have the greatest impact and are likely to last. This accounts for the significant variety of school ground types across the school estate, from larger pockets of land and playing fields, to concrete playgrounds in older Victorian settings.

Ensuring schools can provide the materials, kit, and equipment needed for learning outdoors, such as wellington boots and waterproofs is critical to achieving equity for all children. This is especially important where parents and guardians struggle to afford this kit, but still want their children to participate with their peers.

Time spent learning in outdoor spaces should not be restricted to nature-based activities alone.

Lessons across all subjects should include time spent learning outdoors, not just for the proven benefits to aiding learning and retention, but to support the inclusion and relevance of nature, climate, and sustainability across the curriculum.

Our education system is compounded by persistent absenteeism, poor mental health, and the ongoing impacts of learning lost due to COVID-19. In addition to preparing the next generation to be active participants in our green economy, bringing nature into school as a statutory right has the potential to support broader academic challenges and improved mental well-being.



OUTDOOR LEARNING © PETER CAIRNS/2020VISION

1 [The health benefits of the great outdoors: A systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

2 [Health Benefits from Nature Experiences Depend on Dose - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

3 [What is the best dose of nature and green exercise for improving mental health? A multi-study analysis - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

4 [Children & Nature Programme: the importance of integrating time spent in nature at school - Natural England \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)

Prepare all teachers to teach, guide, and challenge misconceptions about nature and climate

A recent survey of 3000 children, conducted by Save the Children, showed that 70% of children are worried about the world they will inherit, with 75% calling on the Government to take stronger action on their behalf. 60% felt that climate change and inequality are affecting their generation's mental health in the UK, and more than half (56%) believe it is also causing a deterioration in child mental health globally.

Despite children's anxiety about the nature and climate crisis, research shows that 70% of UK teachers have not received adequate training to educate students on biodiversity loss and climate change. Teachers feel underprepared to teach about its implications for the environment and societies around the world, and how these implications can be addressed.

This absence of clear, factual, and practical information available through schools is leading children to source their own information about the nature and climate crisis. Often, this is through unverified sources online, with a tide of misinformation and fake news readily available through social media further exacerbating the rates and severity of eco-anxiety amongst young people.

Supporting children to understand and process the impacts of a changing world **must be a fundamental responsibility of our education system**. Teachers across subject disciplines need to understand nature loss and climate change, including human impact, to be able to confidently impart the practical steps individuals can take to both mitigate and adapt to these changes, instilling a sense of agency and hope in the next generation.

Treat the nature and climate crisis as societal challenges, not just subject matter

Nature loss and climate change are global, societal issues that have significant consequences for everyone, especially children and young people.

Aligned with fundamental British values (democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs), these critically important topics should be threaded through and across school life. This could open the door for teachers to authentically instil a sense of knowledge, agency, and environmental guardianship in every child.

Tackling these challenges, including the creation of a workforce ready for a greener economy, will require a diverse pool of talent that is confident and equipped to respond to emerging opportunities. Research from the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit shows that net zero activity already forms a key part of the UK economy, creating better paid jobs and boosting the UK's economic growth. If the UK is to make the most of the economic opportunities of green growth, young people must be provided with the right education and skills to maximise this potential.

The current approach is siloed, with nature and climate restricted to topics within STEM subjects. This cuts many young people off from being active participants. Encouraging debate, discussion, and reflection across daily school life around these important topics will support a new generation of innovators, creative thinkers, and contributors to a greener society.



What needs to happen?

1 Tackle the skills and knowledge gap in our workforce of talented yet stretched teachers with targeted support and professional development.

2 Take a strategic and sustainable approach to bringing nature into school life, both in the places that children learn in, and how topics such as nature loss and climate change and their real-world impacts, are threaded through and across subjects and activities.

Time spent in nature is associated with positive outcomes for children's learning experiences in schools, including improved attainment and engagement with lessons. Findings from the Natural Connections Demonstration Project⁵ shows us that:

- 92% of participating schools agreed that spending time in nature helped children to engage with their learning.
- 85% agreed that it had a positive impact on behaviour.
- 95% felt that nature as part of lessons made learning more enjoyable.

Children and young people who regularly spend time in natural environments typically have higher achievement (in comparison to their peers or projected attainment) in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. These children exhibit enhanced progress in physical education and drama, and a greater motivation for studying STEM subjects.

We are urging the next government to take us on a path that equips children and young people to be the leaders and potential change-makers required to help us put nature into recovery. And to ensure every child has regular, high-quality access to learning in, through and about the natural environment at school.



OUTDOOR EDUCATION © HELENA DOLBY

⁵ Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Final Report and Analysis of the Key Evaluation Questions - NECR215 (naturallengland.org.uk)

The Wildlife Trusts are a federated movement of 46 charities, supported by a central charity, the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts. Together we have more than 900,000 members, 35,000 volunteers and 3,000 staff across the UK. We share a vision of nature in recovery, with abundant, diverse wildlife and natural processes creating wilder landscapes where people and nature thrive.



Wildlife Trusts care for – and have restored – some of the most special places for wildlife in the UK. Collectively we manage more than 2,300 nature reserves, operate 123 visitor and education centres and own 29 working farms. We undertake research, we stand up for wildlife and wild places under threat, and we help people access nature.

We work with businesses who are committed to being nature positive and take action to help restore 30% of land and seas for nature by 2030.

The Wildlife Trusts

 enquiry@wildlifetrusts.org

 wildlifetrusts.org

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