



A Natural Curiosity

Access to Nature Early Findings

About Early Findings

This paper is one of a series being produced early across the lifetime of Access to Nature. We want to learn about what is working well for the diverse range of Access to Nature projects, and where they face challenges. Even in the early phase of delivery, projects are able to highlight their key learning. This may only be a partial picture of their progress and impact overall but nonetheless provides helpful insights to inform their future work and helps guide that of others. Here we have brought together some early findings about the contribution Access to Nature projects are making **by providing good quality outdoor experiences that are a valuable part of children's development.** More Findings Papers will emerge as Access to Nature progresses and we can further build on what we have here to create a full picture of the learning from projects.

About Access to Nature

Access to Nature is a £28.75 million grant scheme to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those who have little or no contact with the natural environment. Funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces programme and by Natural England, Access to Nature is run by Natural England on behalf of a consortium of major environmental organisations. This is a different kind of programme that aims to benefit 1.7 million people through partnership projects across the country. Funded projects include very local schemes run by small community based groups, through to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale is mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects including for example equipment to allow people with disabilities to access the natural environment across the South West; supporting black and minority ethnic communities to visit the countryside; as well as many projects which are providing a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people.

The Current Context

At the core of the Government's vision of the Big Society is the belief that people should be empowered to improve their communities and shape the services they receive. Access to Nature has a key role to play within this, through encouraging and facilitating community involvement and action at the neighbourhood level in response to local needs, particularly amongst those who have little or no previous contact with the natural environment. The majority of children in England do not have such opportunities (only 47% of 6 – 15 years olds visited the countryside with their school in 2008¹). Access to Nature is providing good quality outdoor learning which can complement everyday experience in schools and early years settings and build the connections and trust between children, teachers and other adults seen as essential in realising the vision of the Big Society². The programme also reflects other Natural England priorities, such as increasing the number of under-represented groups that access the natural environment through the Outdoors for All initiative³ and contributes to established evidence concerning the value of outdoor learning.⁴

¹ Countryside Alliance Foundation, 2010. Outdoor Education: the countryside as a classroom.

² Fisher D & Gruescu S, 2011. Children and the Big Society, ResPublica / Action for Children

³ Outdoors for All - <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/outdoorsforall/diversityreview>

⁴ Dillon et al, 2006. The value of outdoor learning: evidence from research in the UK and elsewhere. School Science Review

A contribution to children's development

There are Access to Nature projects with aims that include the provision of new outdoor experiences, learning about the natural environment, the development of new skills or abilities and a sense of ownership and belonging for natural places. Many of the organisations which have received grants see the woodlands, moors, streams and fields they work in as ideal settings for children to experience nature at first hand. They offer places to climb, run, jump, explore, discover, solve problems, make choices, make friends and encounter new sights, sounds, smells and textures.

Research into outdoor learning for children, such as that linked to Forest Schools, suggests the natural environment has significant potential to support children's development. A study of English and Welsh children involved in Forest Schools identified gains in confidence, social skills, communication skills, motivations, concentration, physical skills and knowledge and understanding of natural places as benefits from their participation⁵. The early evidence from Access to Nature projects, illustrated in this paper, supports these findings, indicating that good quality outdoor activities can be a valuable part of children's development. In particular, the early experiences of some Access to Nature projects indicate impacts in enabling children to understand nature through exploration and discovery, engage with learning, and boost confidence and self esteem.



Early learning about benefits for children

Understanding nature through exploration and discovery

Children's innate curiosity and imagination are excellent drivers for learning when coupled with constructive opportunities and outdoor environments. Some models of learning focus on using this natural curiosity as a springboard which can prompt children to seek out new experiences which stimulate their senses and encourage exploration and discovery⁶. Examples of improved knowledge gained through exploration are emerging from within the Access to Nature projects:

The Early Learning in Nature⁷ project works with early years and primary school children in woodlands. The project provides a process of learning which focuses on children's own enquiries and curiosity about the natural world, creating opportunities for exciting, imaginative and elemental learning. This has increased the knowledge and understanding which children have of the natural world, which is expressed through children's own interpretations (becoming collectors, explorers and inventors) and languages (using clay, painting, dance, drama, story-making or light and shadow). The project enables learning through a focus on the big fascinations which emerge as the children work and play in the woods:

- real and imagined creatures
- experiencing and theorising the seasonal changes and movements of nature - new sounds, shapes, textures, colours, patterns
- being brave and learning skills to navigate the woods – exploring, climbing, building, inventing, testing
- being imaginative, through story telling or drama

The Explore Moor project offers children and young people the chance to discover a wild moorland environment in Cumbria.⁸ The experience of one class which joined the RSPB Community Outreach Officer from the project to learn more about hen harriers visiting the moors illustrates the knowledge which can be gained through blending creativity with discovery and structured opportunities, facets identified in other research as characteristic of successful outdoor learning.⁹ *“A class of 30...have improved their awareness, understanding and appreciation of upland landscape and wildlife by visiting the reserve with the worker and a professional storyteller as part of a project to create a story about hen harriers, a bird which is heavily persecuted in England. The trips involved the children taking part in a series of activities to help them learn about the moorland and the wildlife that lives there, and develop characters that could be used in the story. When we started the project none of the children knew what a hen harrier was but they are fast becoming experts.”* (Project practitioner)

⁵ O'Brien E & Murray R, 2006. Forest School: a marvellous opportunity to learn. Forest Research.

⁶ Perry B, 2001. Curiosity, the fuel of development. Early Childhood Today

⁷ Early Learning in Nature is delivered by Sightlines Initiative. <http://www.sightlines-initiative.com/>

⁸ Explore Moor is delivered by the RSPB. <http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/g/geltsdale/exploremoor.aspx>

⁹ Ballantyne R & Packer J, 2002. Nature based excursions: school students' perceptions of learning in natural environments. International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education

Engagement with the learning process

Early reports from Access to Nature suggest that outdoor learning provided by the funded projects is enabling children to engage effectively with learning processes and, as a result, with their peers and with the adults (project staff, teachers, early years staff) involved in delivering activities. Projects are providing evidence of increased 'soft' learning skills such as communication, listening, sharing and teamwork which can underpin children's capacity to embrace more formal learning.

Many Access to Nature projects involve shared delivery with teachers or other children's workers, and much of the evidence around engagement is reported by teachers. Often, this is expressed as surprise at a contrast in attitude from children when in the outdoors, or a recognition of a (previously unnoticed) ability. These are some of the skills described by a primary school involved with the Early Learning in Nature project:

- improved language development
- increased independence as learners
- better thinking skills
- more perseverance as learners
- more listening to each other and to adults
- more harmony in the classroom, less conflict and more compromise
- more patience from children.



Teachers involved in Access to Nature projects are finding that working outdoors helps both teaching and learning to work more effectively, and are reporting that their own engagement with the learning process is being enhanced. The Wild About Plants¹⁰ project works with primary school children in very local green spaces such as parks. This recollection from a Children's Centre worker relates to work she was inspired to start after taking part in a Plantlife course, and illustrates the commitment to learning generated by the project: *"We covered lots of activities such as nature crowns, hoglet home finding, mud painting, nature weaving, bug hotel building, nature pictures and scavenger hunts. At the beginning of each session, the children chose 'tickets' (smooth stones) from a special bag, which meant they were agreeing to look after themselves, each other and the environment. They were also introduced to Woody, the owl who had fallen from his tree and needed help. At the end of each session we lit a candle in our shelter and the children told Woody about their finds and experiences. They absolutely loved Woody and looked forward to seeing him every week. They wanted to share everything with him."*

Outdoor environments offer children the chance to have fun while learning, and having a good time is also emerging as a key factor in supporting children's learning in the outdoors.

Woodland environments provide the setting for the Walk on the Wildside¹¹ project and its work with primary school children. Teachers and practitioners involved with the work report children's pleasure at being in the outdoors: *"As the weeks progress we were met by more and more excited children, knowing what awaited them at the top of the hill. Once equipped with wellies and warm clothes most would race up to meet the rest of the team at camp, while others became confident enough to enjoy using the short cut route and creep up on the others. One week a couple of boys told me they were too tired to run up the hill as they hadn't slept well because they were too excited about coming to Forest School."* (Project practitioner). In many Access to Nature activities, the physicality of an outdoor learning environment provides a contrast with school, and the sensory nature of outdoor settings provides a rich variety of sights, smells, textures and sounds which children can talk about and which teachers can observe and reflect on with children back at school. *"One rainy afternoon they got off the minibus and jumped for joy because it was raining; 'wicked – it's raining', 'rain is life!' Every time they went tracking, bug hunting or exploring using the maps they found mud along the way. One girl came back to the site...with a huge grin over her muddy face, with a muddy headscarf, muddy knees and hands! At the end of the session, she used the water that had collected on the top of the tarpaulin to carefully wash her face ready to go back to school."* (Project practitioner)



¹⁰ Wild About Plants is delivered by Plantlife International. <http://www.wildaboutplants.org.uk/>

¹¹ Walk on the Wildside is delivered by Castle Cavendish Foundation, Groundwork Greater Nottingham and Wild Things. <http://wownottingham.co.uk/>

Confidence and self esteem

Evidence from the early reports from Access to Nature projects working with children and young people suggests the capacity of outdoor learning to boost confidence and self esteem for children is high. This is consistent with established research¹², though the noteworthy aspect of the feedback from projects is the degree to which outdoor learning seems particularly beneficial for those children who might struggle with mainstream learning environments and processes.



At the Walk on the Wildside project, the staff have observed special benefits for less confident children: *“The programme is particularly good for those children who need extra support in building self esteem, confidence and groupwork skills or who have difficult backgrounds or behavioural or peer group issues and would respond to an alternative and practical small group approach.....one boy with physical and learning disabilities benefitted from both group tasks and 1:1 work. He gained in confidence as he was able to fully participate; he successfully lit a storm kettle and then served everyone a hot chocolate, made and carved a mallet as well helping others to make theirs. His determination and confidence encouraged others not to be afraid of giving things a go.”*

An early years teacher working alongside the Early Learning in Nature project observed the impact for an autistic child: *“In school he was distant and often unresponsive, certainly difficult to communicate with. In early trips to the woods he would squawk like a bird of prey whilst walking very quickly through the woods, as if he had a reserve of excess energy which needed to be released. Once he discovered the stream, he was totally engaged with stones and splashes. Then he found that he could sit in the water and play with the stones within his reach. After a few weeks, we noticed that he hadn’t squawked for a while. As the project drew to a close....he sat with his father by the edge of a mini waterfall, gently tossing stones and exchanging ideas and glances, with lots of smiles. In nursery, he was communicative, responsive and a good deal calmer.”*

A consequence of improved confidence reported by some Access to Nature projects has been children feeling more comfortable, either with learning in outdoor environments, with learning in general (i.e. back in school) or with themselves and their interactions and relationships with others (peers, teachers, parents). Additionally, there is evidence that outdoor learning creates shifts in attitudes towards school. A project delivering the John Muir Award¹³ (an environmental award scheme focused on wild places) with older children, has recorded improved attendance for many young people taking part in the Award scheme. One example shows that attendance improved from around 30% to 95%, another records 100% attendance among a group of Year 10 students who were part of formal alternative education provision. Such figures suggest an appeal in the style and setting of the opportunities provided, and a level of confidence among children and young people to engage with those opportunities.



¹² Barrett J & Greenaway R, 1995. Why Adventure? The role and value of outdoor adventure in young people’s personal and social development. Foundation for Outdoor Adventure.

¹³ The John Muir Award in North East England is delivered by Durham County Council and the John Muir Trust

Early learning about good practice in delivering outdoor learning

Good outcomes are being brought about for children by the Access to Nature programme. This is a result of effective planning, delivery and evaluation practice. A review of the projects highlighted in this paper suggests elements of good practice which are common, and can provide learning for others engaged in outdoor learning. The themes emerging from Access to Nature echo previous reviews of outdoor learning, which suggest that *“properly conceived, adequately planned, well taught and effectively followed up (opportunities)...add value to (children’s) everyday experience in the classroom¹⁴”*

Work has been well resourced. Many children participating in Access to Nature projects have needed to be supplied with warm clothing, wellies and waterproofs. Transport is also a must for many projects, as the goal is to make connections for children who would not usually have the opportunities to access natural places (though projects such as Wild About Plants show that local green spaces can provide great learning opportunities). Basics such as snacks, drinks and toilets are often needed. Study equipment is essential and examples from the projects featured here include binoculars, telescopes, nets, traps, bug viewers etc. Projects report that keeping resourcing simple for schools will make it more likely that those schools will be able to continue outdoor learning independently.

Work has been well planned. The Explore Moor project set up appointments with the Heads of targeted schools to brief them on the work, and ran outreach sessions to the schools prior to visits to the reserve. Similarly, Wild About Plants tailored packages through negotiation with schools to fit with local school development plans. The John Muir Award staff used local radio to encourage new Award Provider organisations to get involved, and offered support and training to them throughout the award process. Walk on the Wildside have involved volunteers in the delivery of their work, and planned and supported that involvement throughout. All the projects featured here have also worked hard to create good staff/child ratios, meaning children have support and opportunities for dialogue while in the outdoors.

Activities have been flexible and creative. Photography, artwork, story telling and film have been successfully used to engage children and enable learning. Making the most of natural settings has been a theme for many projects, enabling children’s imagination to make the most of simple materials such as sticks, leaves and puddles. On a grander scale, the example of the RSPB staff creating what became very popular orienteering sessions on their reserve in the quieter winter months shows how a project continued to enable learning and discovery as the seasons changed.

Work has been followed through. All the projects featured here involved developing relationships with the children’s schools, organisations or providers, using these to encourage ongoing work back at base for children. Examples include outreach sessions into schools at Explore Moor, mentoring and CPD sessions for schools staff involved with Early Learning in Nature, a Wild About plants newsletter to schools and Parents Days run by Walk on the Wildside, recognising that continued engagement for many children will be dependent on the motivation of parents.

Staff have been open to learning differently. These Access to Nature projects follow an experiential model of learning, based in enquiry, listening, dialogue and curiosity. Typically, the projects work to influence teachers and teaching assistants, as well as children, by demonstrating the effect of discovery, rather than the formal transmission of fact. A belief in the potential of children and the potential of natural places to support children’s learning and development is built into the approach, as is openness to the different ways learning can emerge.

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