

Regaining Paradise?
Sustainability in the Early Years

Good morning, my name is Ella Evans, and this presentation will be about my experience completing the John Muir award.

The aim of this project was to engage with a natural environment in four stages; discover, explore, conserve and share, all while learning more about sustainability and our responsibility in environmental protection (United Nations, 2015).

For my project, I visited Abergwili Museum also known as Bishop's park, which provided a diverse natural setting with woods, open green spaces and regions that sustain biodiversity. This environment allowed me to closely study nature and think about how ecosystems work and how humans interact with them (Davis, 2015).

Throughout this presentation, I will reflect on what I discovered and learnt from this experience, evaluate how it relates to sustainability and Education for Sustainable Development, and its relevance to early years practice.

To begin, I'll talk about the location I chose for this project and why it was ideal for studying sustainability and biodiversity.

For this assignment, I chose to visit Abergwili Museum in Carmarthenshire. This site contains a variety of natural settings, including woodlands, open grassland, and riverbanks, which support a diverse range of plant and animal life.

The area can be regarded as a natural outdoor learning environment because it includes both maintained places and more natural environments. This made it a perfect location for studying biodiversity and observing how various elements of nature interacted (Bilton, 2010).

I chose this location as it also offered easily accessible possibilities to interact with nature in a meaningful way. The inclusion of information boards and guided paths also aided my studies, allowing me to identify species and comprehend their roles in the ecosystem.

Overall, this place provided a blend of planned learning and self-directed exploration, allowing me to gain a better grasp of the natural world.

After exploring the environment, I began to consider what I had learned and how these experiences had influenced my perspective of nature and sustainability. During this assignment, I gained a better grasp of the natural world through firsthand experiences. Being in Abergwili Museum allowed me to view nature in ways that books and classrooms do not (Kolb, 1984).

One of the most significant things I found was how interrelated ecosystems are. For example, when observing flowers and insects, I learnt more about pollination and how crucial bees are in carrying pollen between plants. This made me appreciate how important such small creatures are in sustaining plant life and food systems.

I also investigated plant life, including dandelions. Previously, I would have dismissed them as just weeds, but now I understand how they contribute to biodiversity and can be used in a variety of ways. This shifted my viewpoint and made me realise that all parts of nature are valuable.

Another crucial aspect of my visit was seeing natural habitats such as the logs, trees and grassy areas. These settings support a diverse range of living animals, and it made me think about how quickly these habitats can be distributed by human activity.

As part of my project's conservation efforts, I built a bug hotel. This was a practical strategy to enhance biodiversity because it provides habitat for insects while also maintaining ecological balance. This practice taught me that even the smallest efforts can help conserve resources and improve the environment (Elliott and Davis, 2014).

From an early childhood standpoint, this experience highlighted the value of allowing children to discover nature firsthand. Outdoor environments can foster curiosity, creativity and a sense of responsibility towards the environment (Warden, 2012).

In conclusion, this project has helped me get a deeper respect for nature and a better understanding of the need to safeguard it for future generations.

These experiences inspired me to think more closely about the broader concept of sustainability and why it is so vital in today's society. Sustainability is defined as addressing current demands without affecting future generations' ability to meet their own needs as stated by United Nations (1987). This definition emphasises the significance of balancing environmental, social, and economic concerns in a responsible long term manner. Sustainability is typically associated with safeguarding natural

resources, reducing environmental damage, and fostering social responsibility in order to benefit both current and future generations (Naseer *et al.*, 2024).

Sustainability is critical because human activities like pollution, deforestation, and climate change continue to harm ecosystems and biodiversity (United Nations Publications, 2023). According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, rising temperatures, habitat degradation, and biodiversity loss are all contributing to increased environmental disturbance (IPCC, 2023). As a result, there is a growing need for individuals and communities to adopt more sustainable habits in order to preserve natural environments for future generations.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals also highlight the significance of conserving land-based life, taking climate action, and supporting quality sustainability education (United Nations, 2015). Goal 4 in particular emphasizes quality education, while Goals 13 and 15 are concerned with climate action as well as the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity. Education may provide people with the knowledge and values they need to make environmentally responsible decisions (UNESCO, 2020).

Completing the John Muir award helped me gain a better understanding of sustainability by direct connection with nature. Exploring Abergwili Museum gave me the opportunity to experience biodiversity directly and learn about how ecosystems rely on balance and interdependence. Observing pollination, for example, highlighted how important bees are to plant growth and food systems.

Furthermore, as part of my conservation activity, I built a bug hotel, which demonstrated how simple practical activities may help to improve sustainability by supporting insect habitats and biodiversity. Elliott, Arlemalm-Hagsér, and Davis (2020) propose that practical environmental experiences can help people develop environmental responsibility and deepen their connection to nature.

In addition, sustainability is critical in early childhood education since children's early experiences can shape their future attitudes and behaviours toward the environment (Siraj-Blatchford, Hirst, & Boyd, 2018). Allowing children to explore nature and participate in environmental activities can foster curiosity, respect for living things, and knowledge of sustainability challenges at a young age.

Overall, this trip taught me the importance of environmental stewardship and the need to preserve natural regions for the future. It also emphasised that sustainability may be achieved through both large-scale global action and smaller everyday behaviours that promote environmental care and responsibility.

This project not only helped me understand sustainability, but it also taught me the value of Education for Sustainable Development and the role it plays in raising environmental consciousness. ESD is a learning approach that helps people to develop the information, skills and values required to create a more sustainable future (UNESCO, 2020). Education for Sustainable Development seeks to educate people on environmental, social, and economic issues while encouraging responsible decision-making and positive action (GTCS, no date).

Education for Sustainable Development is crucial because it helps people become more conscious of global issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution (United Nations, 2015). Rather than focusing only on academic information, the Education for Sustainable Development encourages students to think critically, solve problems, and consider how their activities affect the environment and society (UNESCO, 2017).

Outdoor learning is regarded as an important component of ESD because direct experiences in nature can help people form a closer connection to the environment (Knight, 2013). This is directly related to my experience with the John Muir Award, as visiting Abergwili allowed me to learn through observation and hands-on involvement with nature rather than classroom learning alone.

For example, seeing pollination and biodiversity helped me grasp how ecosystems work and how various species depend on one another for existence. This lends support to the notion that experiential learning can raise environmental awareness and foster sustainable attitudes (Kolb, 1984). These experiences made me realise how important it is to safeguard natural areas and conserve biodiversity.

In addition, establishing a bug hotel as part of my conservation project reflected ESD principles because it required real action to benefit the environment. Hadland (2020) believes that hands-on environmental activities can assist students to acquire a feeling of responsibility and encourage sustainable habits at a young age. This experience shows that even tiny measures can have a significant impact on environmental sustainability.

ESD is also highly relevant in early childhood education. The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework emphasises the need to allow children to experience the natural world and gain an understanding of their surroundings (DfE, 2024). Allowing children to participate in outdoor learning experiences can boost their curiosity, confidence, and respect for nature, while also promoting emotional and physical growth (Warden, 2012).

Overall, my experience completing the John Muir Award proved how meaningful outdoor activities, introspection, and practical environmental action can all contribute to Education for Sustainable Development.

These ideas can also be linked back to a number of early childhood theorists who highlighted the value of outdoor learning and experiential learning. Friedrich Froebel and Maria Montessori's work, in particular, has a close connection to the activities and experiences in my project.

Friedrich Froebel, the founder of kindergarten, thought that nature plays an important part in children's learning and development (Hayward, 2010). Froebel believed that children learn best from hands-on experiences, play, and discovery in natural settings (Nutbrown, 2011). He saw nature as a vital education instrument that fosters curiosity, creativity, and a sense of belonging in the world (Froebel, 2004).

This is strongly related to my experience with the John Muir Award since I gained knowledge through direct involvement with the natural environment rather than classroom based instructions. Froebel thought that outdoor experiences help people acquire an appreciation and regard for nature, which mirrors my own growing awareness of environmental sustainability throughout the project (Maynard and Waters, 2014).

Froebel also stressed the value of freedom, discovery, and learning through sensory experiences (Bruce, 2012). This can be related to my practical activities which fostered active engagement and independent learning. From an early childhood perspective, this highlights how outside spaces can help children develop confidence, curiosity and awareness of their surroundings (Lilley, 2010).

Maria Montessori also emphasised experiential learning, believing that children learn best when they are independent and engage with real-world surroundings. Montessori believed that education should inspire children to be active learners who investigate their surroundings and develop responsibility through meaningful experiences (Montessori, 1967).

This idea relates to my John Muir experience because most of my learning occurred through observation, discovery, and contemplation in a natural setting. Rather than only reading about sustainability, I was able to experience it firsthand by participating in biodiversity and conservation efforts. For example, the bug hotel allowed me to take practical responsibility for wildlife habitats, which aligns with Montessori's notion that learners develop understanding through intentional activity (Gettman, 1987).

Montessori also felt that exposure to outdoors may improve emotional well-being, focus, and independence. Spending time outside through this project taught me to slow down, pay attention, and consider the value of maintaining natural environments. This demonstrates how outdoor learning can enhance both personal growth and environmental awareness as stated by Waite (2017).

In summary, Froebel and Montessori's ideas emphasises the importance of outdoor learning and experiential education. My experiences with the John Muir award revealed how direct engagement with the environment can foster curiosity, responsibility, and a greater understanding of sustainability, all of which are critical components of early childhood education.

Although the project was extremely beneficial, it is vital to assess both the experience's merits and shortcomings. One of the primary benefits of this experience was the opportunity to interact with nature in a meaningful way. According to research, experiential learning can improve knowledge and stimulate deeper reflection since it involves active engagement rather than passive observation (Beard and Wilson, 2013). This was clear throughout my assignment, since visiting Abergwili Museum and Bishop's Park gave me the opportunity to watch biodiversity, ecosystems, and conservation in action.

In addition, the project emphasised the value of outdoor learning in early childhood education. Outdoor spaces can help children develop curiosity, creativity, and confidence while also boosting physical activity and emotional well-being (White, 2014). My own project-related experiences demonstrated how studying outside of the classroom may lead to increased engagement and understanding. This emphasises the necessity of giving children access to encounter natural areas from a young age.

However, there were certain limitations to my project. One was that my investigation concentrated on a single place. Although this helped me to have a thorough grasp of Abergwili Museum and Bishop's Park, visiting a wider range of ecosystems may have provided a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability and biodiversity. For example, visiting coastal, urban, or woodland habitats could have provided a better comparison of ecosystems and conservation challenges.

Another disadvantage was the relatively limited magnitude of the conservation efforts carried out. While constructing a bug hotel aided biodiversity, larger-scale environmental initiatives such as community projects, litter-picking programs, and tree planting could have had a greater environmental impact. According to Beames *et al.* (2023), successful sustainability education should stimulate community-wide participation and long-term environmental actions.

The project also had a time restriction. Due to time limits, opportunities for further investigation and

study could not be fully exploited. Spending more time in outdoors may have allowed for more detailed observations of seasonal changes, wildlife behaviour, and habitat relationships.

Despite these restrictions, the whole experience was really beneficial and effective in raising my awareness of sustainability, biodiversity, and conservation. It also helped me grasp how outdoor learning may benefit both personal development and early childhood education. Overall, the initiative revealed how meaningful nature-based experiences may foster thought, responsibility, and a stronger commitment to environmental protection (Chawla, 2020).

Overall, the experiences gained through the John Muir Award can be directly linked to early childhood practice and environmental education because they emphasise the importance of outdoor learning and environmental awareness in children's development. Early infancy is recognised as a vital stage for the formation of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, meaning that positive interactions with nature may help children acquire respect and responsibility for the environment at a young age (Elliott and Chancellor, 2014).

Outdoor learning enables children to explore, study, and learn via direct experience, increasing overall development. According to the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, children should be encouraged to explore nature, develop curiosity, and notice environmental similarities and differences (DfE, 2024). My own experiences with the John Muir Award demonstrated how natural environments can encourage observation, questioning, and deeper knowledge through hands-on learning.

The initiative also demonstrated the importance of experience learning in early childhood education. Piaget believed that toddlers learned best by active exploration and interaction with their surroundings (Piaget, 1952). This is tied to my own learning during the project, since understanding sustainability became more meaningful through firsthand experiences such as witnessing biodiversity and participating in conservation initiatives. Using this strategy in early childhood settings could help children acquire environmental awareness through hands-on experiences, rather than relying solely on adult-led instruction.

Furthermore, Education for Sustainable Development is becoming increasingly important in early childhood education as children grow up in a society marked by climate change and environmental challenges (Samuelsson and Kaga, 2008). My experience with the John Muir Award has influenced my ideas on how to include sustainability into early childhood practice. It emphasised how simple experiences in nature may develop curiosity, appreciation, and environmental responsibility. As a future practitioner, I wish to provide children with

regular outdoor learning opportunities and encourage them to build meaningful connections with the natural world.

Overall, this investigation highlighted the significance of outdoor learning and sustainability education in early childhood practice, both in terms of promoting children's development and instilling long-term environmental awareness.

In conclusion, completing the John Muir Award has given me a better understanding of sustainability, biodiversity, and conservation through valuable outdoor activities. The initiative taught me the value of maintaining natural areas and how even tiny conservation efforts may contribute to environmental sustainability (Palmer, 2015).

In addition, the event demonstrated the importance of outdoor learning and experiential education in early childhood practice. By connecting my experiences to theorists like Froebel and Montessori, I gained a better understanding of how nature-based learning may help children develop curiosity, independence, confidence, and environmental awareness.

Overall, my experience showed that outdoor learning can help promote sustainability and holistic development in early childhood education (Samuelsson and Kaga, 2008). As a future practitioner, I wish to inspire children to form meaningful connections with nature and understand the need of safeguarding the environment for future generations.

Reference list

- Beames, S., Higgins, P., Nicol, R. and Smith, H. (2023). *Outdoor Learning Across the Curriculum*. Routledge.
- Beard, C. and Wilson, J. (2013). *Experiential Learning : A handbook for education, training and coaching*. London: Kogan Page.
- Bilton, H. (2010). *Outdoor Learning in the Early Years Management and Innovation*. 3rd ed. [online] Routledge. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203860137/outdoor-learning-early-years-helen-bilton>. (Accessed: 1st May 2026).
- Boyd, D., Hirst, N. and Siraj-Blatchford, J. (2018). *Understanding sustainability in early childhood education across the UK*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, Ny: Routledge.
- Chawla, L. (2020). Childhood Nature Connection and Constructive hope: a Review of Research on Connecting with Nature and Coping with Environmental Loss. *People and Nature*, [online] 2(3), pp.619–642. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10128>. (Accessed: 4th May 2026)
- Davis, J.M. (2015). *Young children and the environment : early education for sustainability*. 2nd ed. Port Melbourne, Victoria: Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, J. and Elliott, S. (2014). *Research in early childhood education for sustainability : international perspectives and provocations*. London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Department for Education (2024). *Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (EYFS)*. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>. (Accessed: 4th May 2026).
- Elliott, S., Årlemalm-HagsérE. and Davis, J.M. (2020). *Researching early childhood education for sustainability : challenging assumptions and orthodoxies*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, Ny: Routledge.
- Elliott, S. and Chancellor, B. (2014). From Forest Preschool to Bush Kinder: An Inspirational Approach to Preschool Provision in Australia. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(4), pp.45–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911403900407>. (Accessed: 4th May 2026).
- Froebel, F. (2004). *The Education of Man*.
- Gettman, D. (1987). *Basic Montessori : learning activities for under-fives*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- GTCS (no date). *Learning for sustainability*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gtcs.org.uk/registant-resources/learning-for-sustainability>. (Accessed: 4th May 2026).
- Hadland, C. (2020). *Creating an Eco-Friendly Early Years Setting*. Routledge.
- IPCC (2023). *AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023*. [online] www.ipcc.ch. Available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/>. (Accessed: 4th May 2026).
- Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experimental Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. London: Prentice-Hall.
- Knight, S. (2013). *Forest school and outdoor learning in the early years*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles, California: Sage.

Lilley, I.M. (2010). *Friedrich Fröebel : a selection from his writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Montessori, M. (1967). *The discovery of the child*. Delhi: Aakar Books.

Naseer, M.M., Hunjra, A.I., Palma, A. and Bagh, T. (2024). Sustainable development goals and environmental performance: exploring the contribution of governance, energy, and growth. *Research in International Business and Finance*, [online] p.102646. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ribaf.2024.102646>. (Accessed 4th May 2026).

Nutbrown, C. (2011). *Threads of Thinking*. SAGE.

Palmer, J.A. (2009). *Environmental education in the 21st century : theory, practice, progress and promise*. London: Routledge.

Piaget, J. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. New York: International Universities Press.

Samuelsson, I.P. and Kaga, Y. (2008) *The Contribution of Early Childhood Education to a Sustainable Society*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2017). *Education for Sustainable Development Goals : Learning Objectives*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2020). Education for Sustainable development: a Roadmap. *Education for Sustainable development: a Roadmap*. [online] DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54675/yfre1448> (Accessed: 4th May 2026)

United Nations (1987). *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development Our Common Future*. [online] Available at: https://gat04-live-1517c8a4486c41609369c68f30c8-aa81074.divio-media.org/filer_public/6f/85/6f854236-56ab-4b42-810f-606d215c0499/cd_9127_extract_from_our_common_future_brundtland_report_1987_foreword_c_hpt_2.pdf. (Accessed: 4th May 2026).

United Nations (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. [online] United Nations. Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>. (Accessed: 4th May 2026).

United Nations (2025). *United Nations*. [online] Un.org. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/> (Accessed: 1st May 2026).

United Nations Publications (2023). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023*. United Nations.

Warden, C. (2012). *Nature kindergartens and forest schools : an exploration on naturalistic learning within nature kindergartens and forest schools*. Auchterarder, Perthshire, Scotland: Mindstretchers.

Waite, S. (2017). *Children Learning outside the Classroom : from Birth to Eleven*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

White, J. (2014). *Being, playing and learning outdoors : making provision for high quality experiences in the outdoor environment with children 3-7*. New York: Routledge.