

Today I'm presenting my reflection and critical evaluation based on my Part 1 experience for the John Muir Award, which I completed at Aberavon Beach Dunes in Port Talbot. The John Muir Award is built around four stages: Discover, Explore, Conserve, and Share. It is inspired by the work of John Muir, who believed that people develop care for nature through direct experience and emotional connection. My visit to the dunes helped me understand sustainability in a practical, embodied way, rather than just as a theoretical concept. When I first arrived at Aberavon Dunes, I focused on my sensory experience. I paid attention to what I could see, hear, smell, and feel. I noticed the movement of the marram grass in the wind, the shifting patterns in the sand created by water and weather, and the contrast between the natural environment and the human activity around it. The dunes felt peaceful, but also fragile. John Muir often wrote about the emotional and sensory connection people feel in wild places, and I experienced that myself. This initial discovery helped me understand sustainability as something visible, immediate, and deeply connected to place. As I explored further, I started to notice the smaller details that make up the dune ecosystem. I found shells, driftwood, seaweed, and bubbles left behind by the tide. I saw signs of wildlife, including small holes in the sand and different footprints from birds, dogs, and people. I looked under rocks and driftwood and found tiny microhabitats that support insects and other coastal species. These observations helped me appreciate how many living things rely on the dunes, and how interconnected the environment is something John Muir emphasised in his writing. Alongside the natural features, I also saw clear signs of human impact. There were remains of campfires, rubbish left behind, and dog waste in several areas. These issues stood out to me because they directly affect the health of the dunes. Dog waste can spread bacteria, damage vegetation, and harm wildlife. Litter can injure animals and pollute the sand. Seeing these issues in person made sustainability feel urgent and relevant, and it made me think about how everyday behaviours shape natural spaces. For my conservation action, I decided to create an awareness poster focusing on litter and dog waste. I also removed some of the rubbish from the campfire area. This action helped me understand that sustainability isn't just about large scale environmental issues it's also about small, everyday behaviours. John Muir believed that caring for nature begins with small acts of stewardship, and this experience helped me understand that personally. It also made me think about how children could learn these same lessons through hands on experiences.

Early Childhood Education for Sustainability, or ECEfS, is becoming increasingly important within early years practice, and my experience at Aberavon Dunes helped me understand why. At its core, ECEfS is about helping children develop the knowledge, values, and behaviours needed to care for the environment. Jordan (2023) explains that sustainability education in early childhood encourages children to develop ecological understanding and environmental responsibility from a young age. Davis (2010)

expands on this by emphasising that sustainability is holistic it includes environmental, social, cultural, and economic dimensions, and positions children as active participants in shaping sustainable futures. These ideas align strongly with John Muir's belief that people develop care for nature through direct experience and emotional connection.

When I reflect on my own experience at the dunes, I can see how closely it connects to several key theories in early childhood education. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) is particularly relevant. My visit followed this cycle naturally: I began with concrete experience as I explored the dunes; I moved into reflective observation as I noticed patterns, textures, wildlife signs, and human impact; I engaged in abstract conception when I connected these observations to sustainability concepts; and finally, I entered active experimentation through my conservation action and awareness poster. Davis (2010) argues that experiential learning is essential for sustainability because children need to feel and experience environmental issues, not just hear about them. My experience demonstrated exactly that sustainability became real because I was physically present in the environment.

Place based learning also helps explain why my experience was so powerful. Smith (2013) argues that children learn more deeply when education is connected to meaningful places. Aberavon Dunes is part of my local community, and exploring it helped me understand sustainability in a personal and meaningful way.

Cutter-Mackenzie et al. (2014) emphasise that children's play in natural environments supports environmental learning because it encourages curiosity, exploration, and problem solving. Although I wasn't playing in the dunes, I was engaging in the same kind of exploratory behaviour noticing shells, driftwood, seaweed, bubbles, footprints, and holes in the sand. These small details helped me understand how ecosystems function and how human behaviour affects them.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory also connects strongly to my experience. Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2020) highlights how children's learning is shaped by ecological relationships, including their interactions with nature. My visit showed me how children can learn about ecosystems through simple observations footprints, holes in sand, shells, driftwood, and plant life. These observations help children understand interdependence, which is a key concept in sustainability education.

UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development framework (UNESCO, 2014) emphasises learning that empowers individuals to act for the environment. My conservation action aligns with this principle by encouraging responsible behaviour. Hirst (2019) argues that sustainability learning is strengthened when children

participate in collaborative inquiry projects, where they explore real issues and develop solutions. Although my project was individual, it still followed the same pattern: I explored a real environmental issue, reflected on it, and created a solution in the form of my awareness poster. My experience also connects strongly to policy frameworks that shape early childhood education. The Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) emphasises outdoor learning, wellbeing, sustainability, and real world experiences. It encourages educators to help children become ethical, informed citizens who understand their environment. My experience aligns with these principles because it involved hands on exploration, reflection, and action. Tinney and Merriman (2018) argue that Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) is deeply connected to early years practice, and that sustainability should be embedded across the curriculum. Their work highlights that children learn best through active engagement and meaningful experiences exactly the kind of learning that happens in natural environments like the dunes.

Internationally, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), highlight the importance of protecting ecosystems like dunes (United Nations, 2015). My experience directly relates to these goals because it involved observing environmental issues and taking action to protect a local ecosystem. DEFRA (2021) also reports that dog fouling and litter are major environmental concerns in the UK. My experience reflects these national issues at a local level, showing how global sustainability goals connect to everyday behaviours.

Experiences like the one I had at Aberavon Dunes can be incredibly valuable for young children, and the literature strongly supports this. Somerville and Williams (2015) argue that children develop environmental understanding through hands-on exploration. Williams and Somerville (2017) highlight how children make meaning through place relations their emotional and sensory connections to environments. These connections help children develop empathy for nature. Davis (2009) identifies emotional connection as essential for long-term environmental responsibility. When children feel connected to a place, they are more likely to care for it.

Cutter-Mackenzie et al. (2014) emphasise that children's play in natural environments supports environmental learning because it encourages curiosity, exploration, and problem-solving. For example, children might investigate footprints, explore shells, or ask questions about plants and animals. Hirst (2019) argues that sustainability learning is strengthened when children participate in collaborative inquiry projects. For example, children could investigate litter in their local area, create posters, or develop solutions to environmental problems. Miller (2010) highlights that sustainability initiatives in early years settings work best when they address real issues that children can see and understand. Dog waste, litter, and damaged vegetation are clear, relatable examples of how human behaviour affects the environment.

The dog waste issue at Aberavon Dunes provides a powerful example of how sustainability can be taught in early childhood. Keep Britain Tidy (2020) reports that dog waste spreads bacteria, damages vegetation, and affects wildlife. DEFRA (2021) highlights that dog fouling is one of the most common environmental complaints in local communities. Miller (2010) argues that sustainability initiatives in early years settings work best when they address real issues that children can see and understand. Dog waste is a clear, relatable example of how human behaviour affects the environment. Children can learn responsibility, empathy, community awareness, environmental impact, and the consequences of behaviour. Educators can use real issues like this to teach sustainability in a concrete way. For example, children could investigate dog waste signs, create posters, discuss responsible behaviour, explore how waste affects plants and animals, or learn about bacteria and hygiene. This aligns strongly with John Muir's belief that caring for nature begins with small acts of stewardship.

There were limitations to my experience. I only had one visit, which meant I couldn't observe long-term changes or seasonal differences. My biodiversity observations were limited by time and weather. Human impact varies daily, so what I saw might not represent typical conditions. Davis (2010) argues that sustainability learning should be ongoing and embedded in everyday practice. A single visit provides valuable insights, but repeated experiences would deepen understanding. Despite these limitations, the experience still provided meaningful learning and strong connections to sustainability theory.

This experience has important implications for early childhood practice. Educators can use local environments like beaches, dunes, parks, and gardens to teach sustainability. Activities such as nature walks, litter picks, habitat exploration, and sensory experiences can help children develop environmental awareness. Weldemariam and Wals (2020) emphasise that children should be seen as active participants in sustainability, not passive learners. John Muir's philosophy also emphasised active engagement with nature. Davis (2010) argues that early childhood educators must create opportunities for children to act, not just observe. My conservation action reflects this - it shows how even small actions can contribute to sustainability.

In practice, this means embedding sustainability across the curriculum, using real environmental issues as learning opportunities, encouraging children to investigate and solve problems, modelling responsible behaviour, supporting children's agency and decision making, connecting learning to local places, fostering emotional connection to nature, and promoting wellbeing through outdoor experiences. These approaches help children develop the knowledge, values, and behaviours needed to care for the environment.

In conclusion, my experience at Aberavon Dunes helped me understand sustainability in a practical and meaningful way. It showed me how fragile ecosystems can be, and how small actions can make a big difference. It also helped me see how powerful nature based experiences can be for children. Through exploration, reflection, and action, children can develop the knowledge, values, and behaviours needed to care for the environment. This experience has strengthened my understanding of sustainability and highlighted the importance of integrating it into early childhood education something John Muir believed in strongly. My visit demonstrated how theory, policy, and practice come together in real world sustainability learning. It showed me that sustainability is not just a concept it is a lived experience, shaped by place, behaviour, and community.

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