



## ECEY6005 Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the Early Years

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**Basic Acknowledgement format of AI tool use:**

I acknowledge the use of AI Tool throughout this study

I used the prompt(s):

1. Co-pilot, Google to find resources.
2. Co-pilot to summarise articles
3. Grammarly to check spelling and grammar, along with plagiarism.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI-generated text as my own work.

I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

## Presentation Script Part 1

### Slide 1 – Introduction

Good morning, my name is Natasha Sullivan, Student 0901804, and this is module ECEY6005, Regaining Paradise, Sustainability in the Early Years.

Today I will reflect on how creating my sustainability scrapbook developed both my personal understanding and my practical engagement with sustainability.

I have chosen to produce a digital scrapbook with my own photographs rather than using AI-generated images, as I am working towards reducing my carbon and water footprint.

Rather than simply researching sustainability, I immersed myself in my local environment by repeatedly visiting the Fourteen Locks Canal walk in Newport. By observing biodiversity, researching species, and reflecting on environmental challenges, I developed a deeper appreciation of the interconnected relationships among people, nature, and sustainable living.

This experience changed the way I view everyday environments, recognising them as valuable places for learning, conservation and community action.

### Slide 2/3

I chose to begin my scrapbook with John Muir because his philosophy strongly influenced my own thinking.

Researching Muir helped me understand that meaningful environmental protection begins with developing emotional connections to nature.

His quote,

*"In every walk with nature one receives far more than they seek,"*

became increasingly meaningful as I completed the project.

I found Muir a fascinating character. I believe his creativity in inventing, his resilience, and his problem-solving skills must have stemmed from being exposed to nature at an early age and from creating his own play. I often wonder if my own problem-solving skills and love for building things come from a similar area.

Muir's 'professional wandering' experiences even influenced President Theodore Roosevelt, which resulted in establishing America's National Parks.

Muir's (1938) quote "*The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness*" really resonates with me.

It was always my aim to expose the children in my care to such 'professional wandering' in our local environments, so that it might have a positive influence on them, heighten their curiosity, improve emotional regulation, and foster a lifelong appreciation for the natural world. Maybe this stems from my own childhood too.

#### **Slide 4 - Discover**

Let's move on to the Discover section.

The experience showed me that the Fourteen Locks canal walk is not only an important historical site, but also a valuable habitat for wildlife. My repeated visits to the canal transformed what had previously been an ordinary walking route into a rich learning environment.

#### **Side 5 – Explore**

Through exploration, I photographed 12 of the trees and researched and identified their native species. Each one has both amazing human and wildlife value, from reducing pollution, a food source and medicinal purposes, to providing habitats for birds, mammals and insects, to providing their food sources.

#### **Slide 6**

Taking time to be in nature, I also found myself noticing the different shapes of the leaves and how they could be used in our early years setting, through activities such as printing, mark-making, comparing, and matching.

The trees also reminded me of the environmental threats that threaten their existence. This reminder is quite close to home, as our local forest had been closed for quite a number of years whilst they tackled a fungal infection, cutting more than 150,000 trees to contain it, and the devastation it caused to the local wildlife.

### **Slide 7**

During my wander, I also photographed 16 wildflowers and plants and was absolutely fascinated to discover their contributions to the environment. On Slide 7, each flower has both human and wildlife benefits. From using the petals and young leaves in salads to combining them to make a wild green soup. Can you imagine children taking part in a foraging activity and then actually cooking a soup from what they found!

### **Slide 8**

An important discovery, too, was that certain flowers and plants can cause harm to both humans and mammals. Each is beautiful, but deadly. I am now able to identify them, and I will share my warnings with other early years practitioners and, more importantly, with the children in our care, so that this knowledge can be passed on. These flowers and plants, despite the dangers, are equally important for sustainability in protecting biodiversity and the local ecosystem, as insects rely on their nectar, pollen and foliage.

Of all the flowers and plants, my favourite must be Cleavers, or as we call it 'Sticky Willy'. Children often pick this and throw it at their friends as it sticks to clothing. Following on from my research, with expert identification and a risk assessment, I demonstrated to our children on a walk that this plant was safe to eat, and some followed suit. Some children even asked for more! Again, this knowledge is lost unless shared.

### **Slide 9**

Then we come on to exploring the wildlife. Now this curious squirrel was quite content with me standing close by to watch it, as someone had sprinkled dry pet food along the embankment. However, through my research, I discovered how damaging grey squirrels are to the environment and the threat they pose to our native red squirrels. I was surprised to learn that there are conservation groups that will 'cull' grey squirrels due to the harm they cause.

I fondly remember squirrels from childhood, with the Tufty squirrel who taught road safety and Squirrel Nutkin from Beatrix Potter stories; however, I did not recall that they were, in fact, both red squirrels.

I decided to leave the squirrels in the heart frames on the scrapbook as a reminder that I initially thought they were connected to my childhood. However, they are having a detrimental impact on sustainability. I am conflicted about having to raise awareness with the person who is feeding them, about the impact of not feeding them, and the potential damage they could further cause to the environment by having to forage for food.

### **Slide 10**

These birds had recently had some chicks. The current climate is having a detrimental impact on these birds. The photos were taken a few weeks ago when the canal was at full level. However, due to recent weather, there are stretches with no water left at all. I discovered this was partly due to human interference, the number of houses surrounding the area, the clay bed being recently dug up and lined with plastic liners, and the lack of water feed from the Pen y Fan pond. All have contributed to this negative impact on the water levels and birds.

### **Slide 11**

Another exploration favourite find of mine was the fruit, seeds and fungi section and its valuable contribution to the environment.

I also reminisced on the fun of finding sycamore seeds and throwing them from a height. These were referred to as 'helicopters' or 'whirly gigs' back then, and how fun language is also used in the outdoors

## **Slide 12 - Conserve**

Through the scrapbook, I became more aware of environmental threats, which has changed my own behaviour. I am more conscious of responsible foraging to ensure wildlife has sufficient food, and I now also appreciate that every plant, even poisonous ones, has ecological value.

The project encouraged me to think about how small individual actions contribute to sustainability. Rather than viewing sustainability as a global issue, I recognised how these challenges directly affect my local community and ecosystems.

My final pledge reflects this learning:

- leave habitats undisturbed
- collect litter
- educate others
- share knowledge within my early years setting

This experience moved me beyond awareness towards environmental responsibility and active citizenship.

## **Slide 13 - Share**

I will be sharing this scrapbook with the university, the children in my setting and I will also be using it as a training module for my team and for raising awareness within my community.

Having not heard of the John Muir Award before, through this scrapbook I discovered that rather than simply learning facts, this award encourages exploration, conservation and sharing experiences with others, demonstrating that sustainability is all about participation. I now feel like a John Muir 'geek' and have been sharing information on this award with anyone who will listen.

I am now going to move on to my academic presentation, part 2.

**Presentation Script Part 2**

Having reflected on my own experience of creating the scrapbook, I will now critically evaluate how such experiences can support early childhood education for sustainability by considering what sustainability means, the environmental and social challenges that make it necessary and how early years practice can develop children's knowledge, relationships, agency, and citizenship.

My argument is that sustainability is achievable, but not through isolated individual actions alone. Early childhood education has an important role in developing the relationships, knowledge, critical thinking and collective agency needed to contribute to more sustainable futures.

**What is sustainability?**

Sustainability is often reduced to recycling, reducing plastic or saving energy. Although these actions are important, this is a limited understanding (UN, 2025; Garcia Manas, 2026).

Sustainable development involves meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, while integrating social, economic, and environmental transformation (WCED, 1987; UN, 2023). It therefore requires a holistic understanding of the relationships among environmental, social, economic, and cultural systems, as reflected in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Hadland (2020) demonstrates how these principles can be translated into everyday nursery practice.

This is particularly significant because young children are already affected by air pollution, extreme weather, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, inequality and unequal access to green spaces. UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development 2030 framework therefore identifies education as a key driver of sustainability through policy, learning environments, educator capacity, and local action.

Sustainability is consequently not simply an additional curriculum topic, but an ethical issue affecting children's health, well-being, rights, learning and futures. However, Chawla (2020) argues that children should not be made responsible for solving

environmental problems created by adults. Instead, education should develop children's knowledge, confidence and agency to participate meaningfully in the world around them (UNCRC, 1989; Mackey, 2012; Trott, 2020).

### **Environmental and social problems**

The environmental challenges we face are complex and interconnected.

My scrapbook provided local examples of this. The decline of ash trees affects not only the trees themselves but also insects, birds, mammals, habitats, and biodiversity (Young and Kaiser, 2014). Similarly, changes in canal water levels affect birds, aquatic plants, and the wider ecosystem. Grey squirrels raise questions about invasive species, biodiversity and the difficult ethical decisions in conservation.

These examples demonstrate the importance of systems thinking. Capra (1997) argues that sustainability requires us to understand relationships and interdependence rather than viewing environmental problems as isolated issues.

This approach is valuable for early childhood education because children can begin to explore relationships, for example, how trees provide food and habitats for creatures while also contributing to human well-being.

However, Elliott (2010) cautions that complex systems thinking may overwhelm young children or oversimplify intricate issues. Therefore, educators must scaffold these concepts appropriately

There is a danger in placing too much responsibility on individuals. Critical sustainability education must therefore avoid suggesting that children are personally responsible for solving climate change (Wheeler, 2023; John, 2025). Instead, education should develop informed, confident and active citizens (WG, 2021), while recognising that wider structural change is also necessary.

### **Early Childhood Education for Sustainability**

Education for Sustainability is more than teaching children about environmental problems. Davis and Elliott (2009; 2014) argue that it should develop relationships with nature, respect, critical thinking, participation, agency, collaboration, fairness

and hope. This is important because knowing does not automatically lead to sustainable behaviour (Colombo *et al.*, 2023).

My scrapbook demonstrates this process: walking, observing, researching, and reflecting, through which I developed an understanding and considered future action. This reflects Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, in which learning develops through experience, reflection, conceptual understanding, and experimentation.

However, experience alone is not enough; a child may walk through a woodland every day without developing a deeper understanding of sustainability. The educator therefore has an essential role in extending children's thinking.

### **Children's rights and citizenship**

This directly relates to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Article 12 recognises children's right to express their views and have those views taken seriously. Article 29 also identifies education as supporting the development of the child's personality, talents and abilities, while developing respect for human rights and the natural environment.

Children are therefore not simply future citizens; they are citizens now.

If children are only viewed as future environmentalists, their current knowledge and agency can be overlooked (Elwell *et al.*, 2025).

Hart (1992) argues the importance of meaningful participation rather than tokenistic involvement. Meaningful participation might involve children investigating litter, deciding how to improve a wildlife area, communicating their findings to families, growing food or monitoring seasonal change.

However, participation must be genuine. There is a difference between allowing children to choose which colour recycling bin to use and genuinely involving them in decisions about their environment.

The adult therefore has a responsibility to listen, respond and create meaningful opportunities for participation (Boyd *et al.*, 2022).

**Welsh policy and legislative context**

The Welsh context is particularly significant. The Curriculum for Wales identifies developing ethical and informed citizens as one of its four purposes, meaning sustainability can be embedded across learning rather than taught as an isolated topic. For example, investigating litter may develop scientific, mathematical, communication, creative, and ethical understanding while supporting children's relationships with their communities, Wales, and the wider world (Hughes *et al.*, 2025).

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 also encourages consideration of the long-term impact of decisions. This challenges early years settings to examine their own food, water, energy, resources and waste.

Hadland (2020) argues that moving toward a more sustainable early years setting requires practical changes across the whole nursery. Sustainability should therefore be something children experience through everyday practice, not simply something they are taught.

**The role of the adult**

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is relevant because children develop knowledge through social interaction. Through the Zone of Proximal Development, children can achieve more with appropriate support than they can independently. (Cherry, 2026), meaning the adult can act as a more knowledgeable other.

However, my own scrapbook demonstrated that adults do not need to know everything. The educator's role is to notice children's interests, ask open-ended questions, introduce accurate knowledge, model curiosity and support investigation. Rather than simply saying, "Don't pick that plant because it is poisonous", an educator could ask: "How could we find out whether this plant is safe?" This develops critical thinking rather than simple memorisation.

The adult should also recognise the knowledge that children and families already possess about plants, food, farming or animals. Sustainable learning is therefore

reciprocal, with the adult learning alongside the child (Beasley, Lee-Hammond and Hesterman, 2021).

### **The environment as the third educator**

The Reggio Emilia approach describes the environment as the third teacher. Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007) argue that the environment influences what children notice, value and investigate. A setting filled with disposable resources communicates one message. Whereas a setting using natural and reclaimed materials, plants, composting and water conservation communicates sustainability through everyday practice.

My scrapbook demonstrates this: the canal taught me about interdependence, environmental change and biodiversity in ways a textbook could not.

However, simply providing natural materials does not automatically create sustainable learning (Elliott and Young, 2016). Natural objects can also become another form of consumption if they are collected without consideration for the environment (Casey and Robertson, 2019). The aim is therefore not simply to bring nature indoors, but to develop a respectful relationship with the natural world.

In practice, children can explore local environments, observe seasonal change, investigate plants and pollinators, grow food, investigate food waste and observe wildlife respectfully. However, these should be sustained experiences rather than isolated activities.

Planting a seed becomes Education for Sustainability when children ask, "What does it need?" Who depends on it? What happens when it dies? This is the difference between an activity about sustainability and a sustained culture of sustainability (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

Ecological footprints can also be explored developmentally. Children do not calculate complex carbon emissions, but can understand resources are used through food, water, travel, electricity and waste. The focus should not be guilt: children are not responsible for solving climate change. Instead, they can learn that they are part of

interconnected systems and that collective choices can contribute to change (UNICEF, n.d.).

Early childhood education must also critically examine its own approaches. There is also a persistent tension between sustainability policies and everyday practice, as settings often aspire to meet policy expectations but face barriers such as limited funding, staff capacity, competing priorities, and accountability pressures that can limit time and resources available for sustained sustainability work (Wheeler, 2023).

Hadland (2020) argues for practical change across the whole setting rather than occasional sustainability activities. It is contradictory to encourage children to recycle while adults unnecessarily purchase resources, or to teach care for nature while restricting outdoor learning because of concerns about mess or risk. Elliott and Davis (2009) therefore argue that sustainability must become embedded within the culture and everyday practices of early years settings.

Access to nature is also unequal. Not every child has a garden, woodland or safe green space, and some communities experience greater environmental inequality. Early years education must therefore create inclusive opportunities: a courtyard, a window, or a local street can all become places for exploring biodiversity, pollution, and community.

Sustainability does not require a perfect natural environment. It requires intentional relationships with the environments children inhabit (Wünsche, Beery and Fridberg, 2025).

### **Conclusion: Is sustainability achievable?**

To conclude, Part 1 demonstrated how my own learning developed through direct experience, place-based exploration, reflection and action. The scrapbook moved me from simply walking through a familiar environment to developing a deeper understanding of biodiversity, interdependence, environmental threats and my own responsibility.

Part 2 has demonstrated how similar experiences can support early childhood education for sustainability by developing knowledge, curiosity, emotional connection, systems thinking, agency, citizenship and responsibility.

However, experiences alone are not enough. The adult has a vital role in extending children's thinking through interaction, questioning and scaffolding. The environment can act as a third educator. Children must be recognised as citizens with rights and voices.

The Curriculum for Wales, the UNCRC and the Well-being of Future Generations Act all support a more participatory and future-focused approach to education.

Together, these frameworks support an approach to early years education that is not simply about teaching children to recycle. It is about developing relationships between children, communities and the living world.

Returning to John Muir's words from Part 1:

*"I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in"*

For me, this quote now represents more than my personal experience.

Going out into my local environment led me to look more deeply at biodiversity, environmental threats and my own responsibilities. It also demonstrated how an ordinary experience can become a meaningful learning journey. This is the potential of early childhood education for sustainability. Children do not need to be burdened with responsibility for solving climate change.

Instead, they can be supported to develop knowledge, relationships, agency and hope, while adults and wider systems take responsibility for structural changes required.

So, can we be sustainable?

I believe we can.

Not through perfection, not through one activity and not by placing responsibility on children.

But through relationships, knowledge, participation, collective action and a willingness to continually reflect and change.

For me, sustainability is therefore not a final destination.

It is something we learn, practise and develop together.

And, like John Muir, sometimes by going out into the world, we find that we are also going inwards, developing a deeper understanding of ourselves, our responsibilities and our relationship with the living world.

And that concludes my presentation, thank you.

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