

Script

Part 2A - Reflection

The area I have chosen for the John Muir Award is the Swansea Valley Trail. I selected this location because I love walking along this path with family and friends, often joined by my dogs, who particularly enjoy exploring the natural surroundings. The trail provides a peaceful and calm environment, offering a valuable opportunity to experience nature away from the noise and demands of everyday life. A key feature of the setting is the sound of the trickling waterfall, along with flowing water, birdsong, and rustling vegetation, all of which contribute to a sensory-rich and tranquil atmosphere. This combination of natural sounds and scenic woodland scenery enhances feelings of relaxation and connection with the environment. Overall, the Swansea Valley Trail offers an accessible and diverse natural space that supports exploration, reflection, and an appreciation of local biodiversity, making it a suitable location for completing the John Muir Award.

The Swansea Valley Trail takes visitors on a journey through the area's rich industrial history while showcasing how the landscape has been regenerated into a beautiful natural environment. The trail begins at Swansea Waterfront, near the impressive Sail Bridge, and follows the River Tawe. Along the route, visitors can see well-known landmarks, including the Liberty Stadium, historic brick warehouses, and the remains of the old copperworks, which highlight the area's industrial heritage. The trail then crosses to the western side of the river, passing through Glais and over the Afon Tawe Bridge before reaching Coed Gwilym Park. This area is home to the Clydach Heritage Centre and provides a peaceful place for visitors to relax and enjoy the surrounding nature. The route continues alongside the canal to Pontardawe before ending on the eastern side of the valley, where visitors are rewarded with stunning panoramic views of the Brecon Beacons National Park. Overall, the Swansea Valley Trail successfully combines history, culture, and nature. It offers an opportunity to learn about the area's industrial past while appreciating its environmental regeneration, diverse wildlife, and scenic beauty. These qualities make it an ideal location for the John Muir Award and for promoting an appreciation of the natural environment.

Completing the John Muir Award at the Swansea Valley Trail has significantly enhanced my understanding of the importance of conserving and protecting the natural environment. Throughout this experience, I discovered that the trail is not only an area of natural beauty but also a habitat that supports a diverse range of plants and wildlife. I learned about the ecological value of species such as ash trees, Queen Anne's lace, and privet, and how they contribute to biodiversity by providing food, shelter, and habitats for insects, birds, and other wildlife. I also gained a greater appreciation of the essential role that pollinators, particularly bees, play in maintaining healthy ecosystems.

Spending time exploring the trail allowed me to experience the tranquillity of the natural environment. The peaceful atmosphere, combined with the sounds of the waterfall, flowing river, birdsong, and rustling trees, encouraged me to slow down, reflect, and develop a stronger connection with nature. These experiences highlighted the positive impact that outdoor environments can have on both physical and mental well-being, reinforcing the importance of protecting accessible green spaces for future generations.

During my visits, I also recognised the negative impact that litter can have on the environment and local wildlife. Observing discarded waste motivated me to take practical action by placing litter bags along the trail and contacting Swansea Council to request the installation of additional bins. This experience demonstrated that even small actions can contribute to environmental conservation and encourage others to take responsibility for protecting shared natural spaces.

Overall, completing the John Muir Award has deepened my understanding of sustainability, biodiversity, and environmental stewardship. It has shown me that conservation is not only about protecting wildlife but also about making informed choices and taking positive action within my local community. This experience has inspired me to continue caring for the natural environment and has reinforced the importance of encouraging others to value and protect the landscapes and wildlife that surround them.

Completing the John Muir Award reminded me of the importance of spending time outdoors and the positive experiences I had in nature during my childhood. Exploring the Swansea Valley Trail allowed me to reconnect with the natural world, appreciate its beauty, and recognise how peaceful and restorative outdoor environments can be. It also made me reflect on the importance of providing children with similar opportunities to explore nature from an early age. By encouraging children to discover woodlands, rivers, plants, and wildlife through first-hand experiences, they can develop curiosity, confidence, and a lifelong appreciation for the environment. These experiences help children understand the importance of caring for the world around them and inspire them to adopt sustainable behaviours, such as respecting wildlife, protecting natural habitats, and reducing litter. This reflects the values of the John Muir Award, which encourages individuals to discover, explore, conserve, and share their experiences, fostering a sense of environmental responsibility that can last throughout life.

Part 2B - Academic

Sustainability refers to meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). It encompasses environmental, social, and economic dimensions, encouraging the responsible use of resources, the protection of

ecosystems, and the promotion of equality and well-being. As concerns about climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion continue to grow, sustainability has become a global priority and is reflected in international initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). These goals recognise that achieving a sustainable future requires collective action across education, health, communities, and the environment, and they explicitly position quality education, including early education, as a foundation for achieving broader social and environmental outcomes (United Nations, 2015).

In the context of early years education, sustainability is highly relevant because the early years are a crucial period for developing children's attitudes, values, and behaviours, which can influence their lifelong relationship with the environment and society (Davis, 2010). Early years settings provide opportunities for children to engage in practical experiences such as gardening, recycling, caring for plants and animals, reducing waste, and exploring the natural world. These experiences encourage curiosity and respect for living things while helping children to understand that their actions can have a positive impact on the environment (Elliott and Davis, 2018). Sustainability also supports children's physical, social, and emotional development by encouraging outdoor learning, teamwork, problem-solving, and a sense of belonging within their local community (Knight, 2013). Researchers have argued that embedding sustainability within early years pedagogy is not simply an environmental add-on but a concept of childhood itself, in which children are positioned as capable agents of change within their communities rather than passive future stakeholders (Davis, 2010).

Critically, while introducing sustainability in the early years can promote environmental awareness and positive behaviours from an early age, practitioners must ensure that learning is developmentally appropriate. Young children learn most effectively through play, exploration, and first-hand experiences rather than abstract discussions about complex global issues such as climate change. Therefore, sustainability should be embedded naturally within everyday routines and child-centred activities instead of being taught as a separate topic. Practitioners also need to avoid creating fear or anxiety about environmental problems by focusing on positive actions that children can understand and participate in (Ojala, 2012). This is an important pedagogical distinction, since research into children's eco-anxiety suggests that overly negative or catastrophising messages about climate change can undermine children's sense of agency and emotional well-being, whereas hope-based, action-oriented approaches are more likely to sustain long-term engagement (Ojala, 2012).

Furthermore, sustainability in the early years extends beyond environmental education. It also includes promoting inclusion, equality, healthy lifestyles, cultural diversity, and strong partnerships with families and the wider community. This holistic approach reflects the principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which emphasises

children's well-being, active learning, and positive relationships (Department for Education, 2021). However, despite the recognised benefits, implementing sustainability can present challenges, including limited funding, insufficient practitioner training, and restricted access to outdoor environments in some settings (Boyd, 2019). Consequently, while sustainability is highly relevant to early years practice, it's success depends on practitioners having the knowledge, resources, and confidence to integrate sustainable practices meaningfully into children's everyday learning experiences.

Completing the John Muir Award provides a valuable framework for enhancing early years education by embedding the principles of sustainability, outdoor learning, and holistic child development. The award encourages participants to Discover, Explore, Conserve, and Share their experiences of nature, promoting active engagement with the environment rather than passive learning (John Muir Trust, 2023). This approach aligns closely with the philosophy of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), where children are viewed as capable, competent learners who construct knowledge through meaningful experiences (Moss, 2019). The award therefore supports Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) by developing children's knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to become environmentally responsible and socially aware citizens (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008).

The philosophy underpinning the John Muir Award reflects the educational principles of Friedrich Froebel, who believed that nature is central to children's learning and development. Froebel argued that children learn best through play, exploration, and direct interaction with the natural world, describing nature as a space where curiosity and creativity can flourish (Froebel, 1887; Bruce, 2012). The Swansea Valley Trail provided opportunities to observe wildlife, investigate plants, and explore woodland habitats, demonstrating how outdoor experiences encourage children to ask questions, solve problems, and develop a sense of wonder. Critically, Froebel's philosophy remains highly relevant today, particularly as increasing urbanisation and technology have reduced children's opportunities to engage freely with nature (Louv, 2010). The John Muir Award helps to address this by encouraging regular, meaningful contact with the natural environment, echoing Froebel's conviction that direct sensory experience of the natural world underpins holistic development (Bruce, 2012).

Similarly, the work of Lev Vygotsky highlights the importance of social interaction in children's learning. Vygotsky's theory suggests that children develop understanding through collaboration, discussion, and guidance from more knowledgeable others within the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). During the John Muir Award, activities such as identifying wildlife, discussing environmental issues, and participating in conservation projects encourage collaborative learning and shared problem-solving. Practitioners can scaffold children's understanding by asking open-ended questions, modelling sustainable behaviours, and supporting children to reflect on their

observations (Wood, 2013). Consequently, outdoor learning becomes both a social and cognitive experience that extends children's thinking, supporting the view that higher psychological functions first emerge through shared activity before being internalised by the individual child (Vygotsky, 1978).

The award also reflects the principles promoted within Early Childhood, Play, Learning and Care, where outdoor environments are recognised as essential spaces for children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development (Tovey, 2007). Natural environments offer open-ended opportunities for exploration that cannot always be replicated indoors. Woodland settings encourage imaginative play, risk-taking, resilience, communication, and independence, while simultaneously supporting physical development and emotional well-being (Knight, 2013). Critically, although outdoor learning provides significant developmental benefits, its effectiveness depends on practitioners having the confidence, knowledge, and resources to facilitate meaningful experiences rather than viewing outdoor play solely as recreation (Waite, 2017). Where practitioners lack training or confidence in risk-benefit assessment, outdoor sessions can default to supervised, low-challenge activity that limits the developmental value of the woodland environment (Waite, 2017).

The John Muir Award strongly supports the rights-based approach outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 31 recognises every child's right to play, rest, and participate in recreational activities, while Article 29 highlights education that develops respect for the natural environment (United Nations, 1989). By providing opportunities for children to freely explore natural spaces, investigate wildlife, and participate in conservation activities, the award enables children to exercise these rights in meaningful ways. Furthermore, the UNCRC promotes children's participation and voice, allowing them to become active contributors to decisions about caring for their local environment rather than passive recipients of information (Lundy, 2007).

From an ESDGC perspective, the John Muir Award extends beyond environmental conservation to include themes of social justice, global citizenship, and responsible decision-making. ESDGC encourages learners to understand the interdependence between environmental, economic, and social sustainability (Welsh Government, 2012). Through exploring local ecosystems and recognising the impact of issues such as pollution, habitat loss, and biodiversity decline, children begin to appreciate that their individual actions have wider consequences for both local and global communities. This develops critical thinking and encourages children to become active citizens who understand that sustainability involves protecting both people and the planet (Davis and Elliott, 2014).

The award also supports the objectives of UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development, which promotes learning that empowers individuals to make informed decisions for environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society (UNESCO,

2017). Rather than teaching sustainability as a collection of facts, the John Muir Award encourages experiential learning, enabling children to develop environmental values through direct interaction with nature. This experiential approach is more likely to foster lasting behavioural change than classroom-based instruction alone, since values and dispositions formed through repeated, first-hand experience tend to be more durable than knowledge acquired through transmission-based teaching (UNESCO, 2017; Elliott and Davis, 2018).

In Wales, the principles of the award align closely with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which places sustainable development at the centre of public decision-making (Welsh Government, 2015). The Act aims to improve the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of Wales by ensuring that current actions do not compromise the needs of future generations. Through conservation activities, litter reduction, habitat protection, and developing environmental awareness, the John Muir Award encourages participants to contribute towards these long-term goals. Similarly, the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 promotes individual well-being, community participation, and preventative approaches (Welsh Government, 2014). Spending time in nature has been shown to improve physical health, mental well-being, confidence, and social relationships, demonstrating how environmental sustainability and personal well-being are closely interconnected (White, 2013).

Critically, although the John Muir Award offers significant educational benefits, its impact depends upon meaningful implementation. Simply visiting outdoor spaces does not automatically develop environmental stewardship (Chawla, 2009). Practitioners must intentionally facilitate reflection, discussion, and opportunities for children to act through activities such as habitat creation, wildlife observation, gardening, or litter collection. In addition, access to quality green spaces is not equal for all children, meaning that socioeconomic inequalities can limit opportunities to engage with nature (Natural Resources Wales, 2020). Addressing these barriers is essential if the principles of inclusion, social justice, and sustainability are to be realised fully, and this points to a broader responsibility for settings and policymakers to ensure that outdoor and nature-based learning is not disproportionately available to already-advantaged children (Natural Resources Wales, 2020).

A further consideration is the role of professional development in sustaining the impact of awards such as the John Muir Award beyond the period of participation. Continuing professional development that builds practitioners' ecological knowledge, confidence in outdoor risk management, and pedagogical skill in facilitating reflective dialogue is likely to determine whether the values fostered during the award are embedded into everyday practice or remain a one-off experience (Boyd, 2019). Embedding sustainability into a setting's ethos, rather than treating it as an isolated project,

therefore requires ongoing leadership commitment, whole-staff training, and the integration of outdoor learning into curriculum planning (Boyd, 2019; Waite, 2017).

Overall, completing the John Muir Award demonstrates how outdoor learning can enrich early years education by integrating the philosophies of Froebel and Vygotsky with the principles of ESDGC, children's rights under the UNCRC, and Welsh sustainability legislation. By encouraging children to discover, explore, conserve, and share their experiences of nature, the award nurtures environmentally responsible, socially aware, and active citizens. It reinforces the understanding that sustainability is not solely about protecting the environment but also about promoting children's well-being, participation, equality, and responsibility towards future generations. Ultimately, the value of the award lies not in the outdoor activity itself but in the intentional, reflective, and inclusive pedagogy that practitioners build around it.

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