

ECEY6005

Regaining paradise? Sustainability in the Early Years

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1. Script A

Good afternoon. Today, I will share my experience of completing the John Muir Award and reflect on how it has influenced my understanding of sustainability and my relationship with the natural world.

For this project, I chose to focus on my own garden. Rather than visiting a woodland or nature reserve, I wanted to demonstrate that meaningful conservation can begin within an ordinary urban environment. Throughout the project, I completed the four John Muir Award challenges: Discover, Explore, Conserve and Share, documenting the changes I made and the wildlife I encountered. The experience showed me that even small outdoor spaces can support biodiversity and that simple, consistent actions can positively impact local wildlife. Most importantly, it changed the way I view conservation, showing that protecting nature begins with the environments we experience every day.

The Discover stage focused on understanding the wildlife already present within my garden before making any changes. Although I spent time there regularly, I had never taken the opportunity to observe it closely. By slowing down and paying attention, I identified a surprising variety of birds, insects, bees, butterflies, spiders, and plants, highlighting the biodiversity within a relatively small urban space.

As I continued observing the garden, I became more aware of seasonal changes, including flowering plants, increased insect activity and frequent visits from birds. Photographing these observations encouraged me to appreciate nature that I had previously overlooked. This stage demonstrated that effective conservation begins with observation and understanding. Before habitats can be improved or protected, it is essential to recognise and value the wildlife that already exists.

The Explore stage encouraged me to look beyond simply observing my garden and instead consider how each element contributed to the wider ecosystem. As I spent more time exploring, I noticed details I had previously overlooked, including berries forming after flowers had faded, snail eggs hidden within a hanging basket and the different insects attracted to specific plants. These discoveries demonstrated that even familiar environments are constantly changing and support a wide range of interconnected life.

This stage also reinforced the importance of slowing down and engaging with nature more intentionally. Rather than walking past my surroundings, I began to observe them with greater curiosity and appreciation. As a result, I developed a deeper understanding of biodiversity and the role that even the smallest organisms play in maintaining healthy ecosystems. The experience highlighted that exploration does not always require new places; sometimes the greatest discoveries can be made by viewing familiar environments from a different perspective.

The Conserve stage was the most rewarding part of my John Muir Award journey because it allowed me to take practical action to support local wildlife. Rather than focusing on improving the appearance of my garden, I began to consider how it could provide food, water and shelter throughout the year. This shifted my perspective, helping me recognise that even a small garden can contribute to a much wider ecosystem.

To increase biodiversity, I planted nectar-rich flowers to attract bees, butterflies and other pollinators, maintained bird feeders and ensured fresh water was always available. More recently, I also began making bumblebee drinking cups to provide safe places for pollinators to drink. However, the conservation effort I value most was creating a hedgehog highway after learning about the challenges hedgehogs face due to habitat loss. By providing access, food and fresh water, I was delighted to see hedgehogs regularly visiting my garden, demonstrating that relatively small changes can have a meaningful impact on local wildlife.

This stage reinforced that conservation is not limited to large-scale environmental projects. Instead, it often begins with simple, consistent actions that improve habitats and encourage biodiversity. It demonstrated that everyone could contribute to conservation, regardless of the size of their outdoor space.

The final stage of the John Muir Award, Share, provided an opportunity to reflect on the project and communicate its impact. Creating a digital scrapbook allowed me to document the changes I made to my garden and record how my understanding of sustainability developed throughout the Award. Looking back at the photographs highlighted not only the increase in biodiversity, but also the value of consistent conservation efforts over time.

This experience will also influence my future practice as an Early Years practitioner. It reinforced the importance of providing children with meaningful opportunities to explore nature, care for living things and develop curiosity about the environment. Most importantly, it demonstrated that valuable outdoor learning does not depend on large natural spaces. Gardens, school grounds and community areas can all provide rich opportunities for children to connect with nature and develop an appreciation for sustainability.

Completing the John Muir Award has transformed my understanding of sustainability and demonstrated that meaningful conservation begins with the environments we

experience every day. Rather than viewing conservation as something that only happens in forests or protected areas, this project showed that even a small urban garden can support biodiversity and provide valuable habitats for local wildlife.

The experience has also strengthened my understanding of the importance of outdoor learning within Early Years practice. It reinforced that children develop respect for the environment through first-hand experiences, encouraging curiosity, responsibility and a sense of connection with the natural world. As a future practitioner, this project has inspired me to create opportunities for children to explore, care for and value nature within their own communities.

Above all, the John Muir Award has shown me that sustainability is built through small, consistent actions. Thank you for listening.

2. Script B

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is now a key part of early childhood education, with young children seen as active contributors to a more sustainable future (UNESCO, 2020; Davies and Elliott, 2024). The John Muir Award is one way to support this, as it encourages children to connect with nature through the four stages: Discover, Explore, Conserve, and Share (John Muir Trust, 2025). This presentation examines the value of the Award in helping children learn about sustainability, environmental responsibility, and global citizenship. It also considers how well the Award fits with the Curriculum for Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015), the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and the ideas of Froebel, Dewey, Steiner, Montessori and Malaguzzi. Both the strengths and weaknesses of the Award are discussed to judge its value for Education for Sustainable Development.

Education for Sustainable Development

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is now seen as a key part of early childhood education. It helps children gain the knowledge, values, and skills they need for a more sustainable future (UNESCO, 2020; Davies and Elliott, 2024). ESD treats children as capable individuals who can make real contributions to environmental, social, and economic sustainability through meaningful experiences, not just as future citizens. This idea aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which emphasise the importance of education in addressing global issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2026).

Recent research suggests that teaching about sustainability should go beyond simply getting children involved in environmental activities. Planting flowers, recycling, or looking after wildlife does not help children truly understand sustainability unless they also get chances to ask questions, reflect, and think critically (UNESCO, 2020). Davies and Elliott (2024) also believe that children need to understand why sustainability is important so they can make informed choices rather than just following along. This means that the success of any sustainability

program depends not only on what children do, but also on how well they learn from those experiences.

In Wales, these ideas are built into the Curriculum for Wales, which encourages real, enquiry-based learning and aims to help children become ethical and informed citizens (Welsh Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2022). However, just following educational policy does not always lead to meaningful learning. Teachers need to give children opportunities to explore, discuss, and reflect on environmental issues if we want sustainable habits to last beyond the classroom and become part of their lives (Estyn, 2024). This approach helps us examine whether the John Muir Award truly builds environmental understanding or merely engages children in conservation activities.

Critically Evaluating the John Muir Award

The John Muir Award uses four challenges- Discover, Explore, Conserve, and Share- to help participants connect with nature, rather than just learning about sustainability in the classroom (John Muir Trust, 2025). This hands-on approach follows Dewey's (1938) idea that real learning comes from experience, enquiry, and reflection. Froebel also believed that spending time in nature helps children develop curiosity, creativity, and respect for living things (Bruce, 2020; Tovey, 2013). These ideas are still important in early childhood education today, where real-world experiences are seen as key to helping children understand their environment.

The project put these ideas into practice by turning a home garden into a space that supports more wildlife. Activities included planting flowers for pollinators, setting up bee drinking stations, and making it easier for hedgehogs to enter. Instead of just reading about biodiversity, participants observed, researched, and made decisions, making sustainability something they experienced firsthand. This approach matches the Curriculum for Wales, which values real, enquiry-based learning and encourages students to connect with their local environment (Welsh Government, 2024; Estyn, 2024).

However, we should not assume the John Muir Award is valuable simply because conservation activities are carried out. Experiential learning works best when children are encouraged to ask questions, investigate, and reflect on their actions, rather than simply taking part in activities (UNESCO, 2020). The Award is a framework, not a full educational program. Its success relies on skilled educators who can help children think more deeply, lead good discussions, and help them see the bigger environmental picture (Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Elliott, 2017). So, while the John Muir Award is a strong starting point for Education for Sustainable Development, its real impact depends on the quality of teaching, not just finishing the Award.

Contemporary Perspectives: Anthropocene, Posthumanism and Nature Connectedness

Recent views on Education for Sustainable Development suggest that it should go beyond merely teaching children to care for nature. Instead, it should help them

understand their place in the natural world. The idea of the Anthropocene suggests that human actions have significantly altered Earth's ecosystems, so education needs to prepare children to face complex environmental challenges (Larson, Fischer and Clayton, 2022). Because of this, sustainability education should not only raise environmental awareness but also help children think critically about the connections between people and nature (UNESCO, 2020; Davies and Elliott, 2024).

Posthumanism supports this idea by challenging the old belief that humans are separate from nature. It highlights how people, animals, plants, and ecosystems are all connected, and encourages children to see themselves as part of a larger ecological community (Hume, 2022; Osgood and Odegard, 2022). The John Muir Award follows this approach by encouraging direct experiences in nature. In the project, the garden became more than just a family space; it was also seen as a home for pollinators, birds, and hedgehogs. This change shows how real experiences can help children develop empathy and a stronger sense of responsibility for the environment.

However, some critics say that just spending time in nature is not enough to help children become environmentally responsible. Without chances for discussion, reflection, and critical thinking, outdoor learning might be fun but may not have a lasting impact (Beery and Fridberg, 2022). Steiner, Montessori, and Malaguzzi also saw the value of rich learning environments and children's connections with nature, but they stressed that skilled educators are needed to help children think more deeply through exploration, independence, and meaningful activities (Montessori, 1967; Nicol and Taplin, 2017; Aljabreen, 2020). So, the real value of the John Muir Award is not just in giving children access to nature, but in how educators use these experiences to encourage critical thinking, environmental care, and lifelong sustainable values.

Alignment with the Curriculum for Wales

The John Muir Award aligns well with the Curriculum for Wales by offering real, enquiry-based learning that helps children explore environmental issues and consider how their actions matter (Welsh Government, 2024). By taking part in hands-on conservation, learners build skills that support the Four Purposes, especially as ethical and informed citizens who value caring for the environment. The Award also helps learners become ambitious and capable by encouraging them to observe, solve problems, and work independently. Working together on conservation projects also helps them become creative and enterprising contributors.

The Award also supports the Statements of What Matters in Humanities, Science and Technology, and Health and Well-being by encouraging children to look at how people, places, and nature are connected (Welsh Government, 2022b; Welsh Government, 2022c; Welsh Government, 2022d). The idea of Cynefin is a key part of the Award, as learners build a sense of belonging and responsibility by getting involved with their local environment (Welsh Government, 2022a). For example, improving biodiversity in a familiar garden showed that caring for the environment can start in everyday places, and that local actions can help achieve bigger sustainability goals.

While the John Muir Award aligns well with Welsh educational policy, simply meeting policy requirements does not prove it is effective. Real learning happens when teachers adapt activities to children's interests, encourage them to think deeply, and give them opportunities for ongoing enquiry rather than just one-off conservation tasks (Estyn, 2024). The Award should add to, not replace, a wider sustainability curriculum that covers environmental, social, and economic topics equally. Its main strength lies in turning the goals of the Curriculum for Wales into real learning experiences, provided these are supported by effective teaching and regular reflection (Welsh Government, 2025; UNESCO, 2020).

Conclusion

Overall, this evaluation shows that the John Muir Award is a useful way to support Education for Sustainable Development in early childhood education. By focusing on hands-on learning, caring for the environment, and helping children connect with nature, the Award matches current educational ideas and fits well with the Curriculum for Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015), and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Still, the Award should not be seen as a complete solution for teaching sustainability on its own. Its success depends on educators who can help children think deeply, ask questions, and explore ideas. While the John Muir Award brings real educational benefits, its main value is in helping children become environmentally responsible, thoughtful, and aware of the world, so they are ready to help build a more sustainable future.

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