Ecology and Spirituality: Sacred Activism?







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Overview

- Education - One School One Planet.
- Gardening - Philosophical Gardens.
- Fairies at the bottom of the garden.

Top-Down and Bottom-Up

- Greta Thunberg - Fridays for Future youth movement and her powerful speeches (Thunberg, 2019).

- In 2019 the UK government officially declared a “Climate Emergency,” partly in response to the Extinction Rebellion protests.

- 2015 - The Paris Agreement.

- Recent Ipsos Mori survey suggests that “85% of Britons are now concerned about climate change” (Ipsos Mori, 2019).

- There are also a great many community gardening projects, etc.

- How do we turn this into practical action - e.g. preventing species loss, enhancing biodiversity, etc.





Connection to Nature

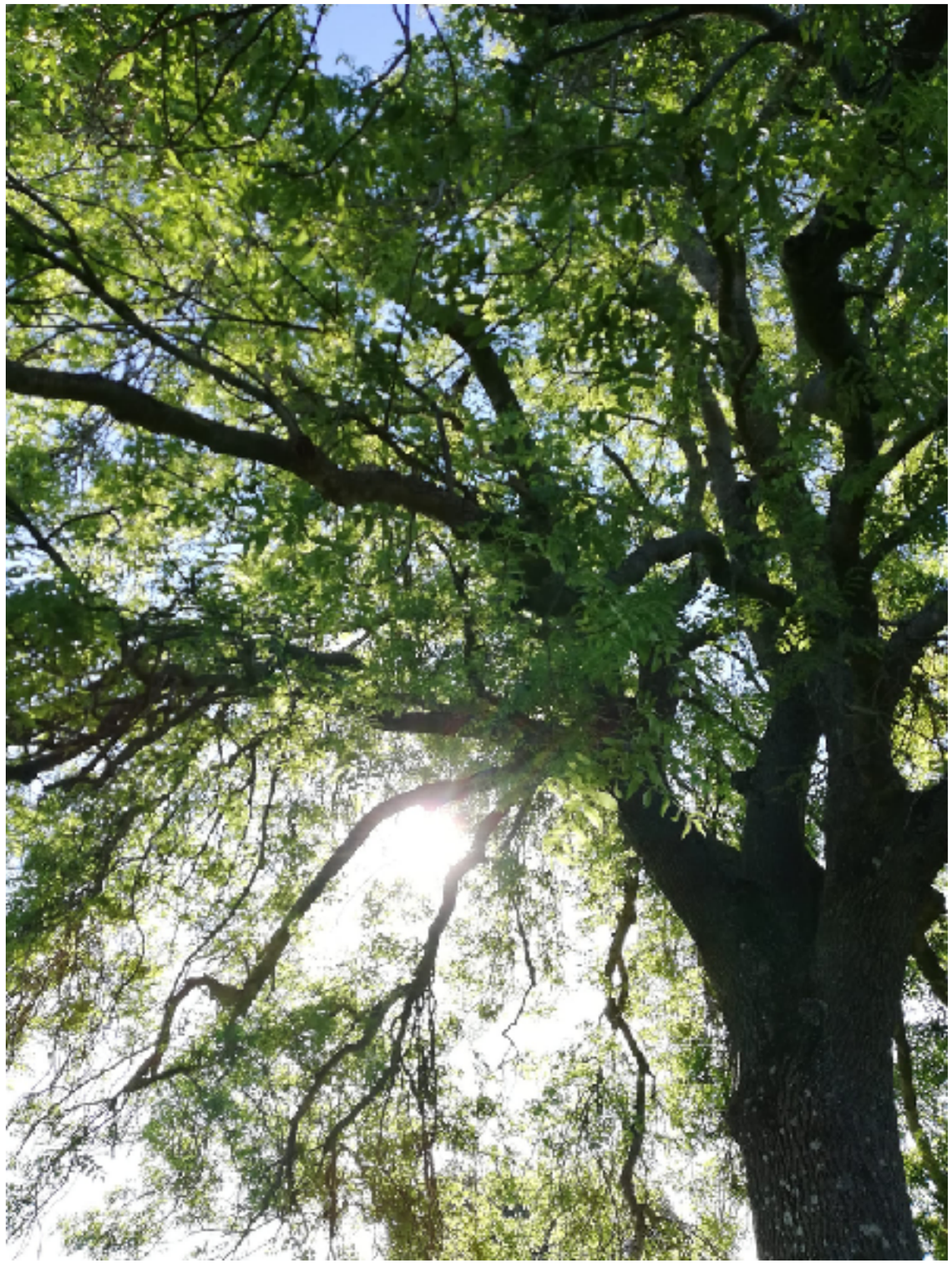
- Many commentators have suggested that the current ecological crisis has its roots in the perceived disconnect between humans and the natural environment, which has emerged, especially in the Western world, over the last two hundred years (Roszak, 1993).

- “CNT theory suggests that a relationship with the natural world directly affects people's physical, mental, and overall wellbeing due to benefits gained by increased exposure to nature and positive experiences in the natural world… Direct experiences with natural settings seem to have very profound emotional effects on people…and a stronger commitment to nature could lead to higher human interest in environmental protection” (Restall & Conrad, 2015, p. 1).

- Experiences in nature lead to an increase in pro-environmental behaviour.

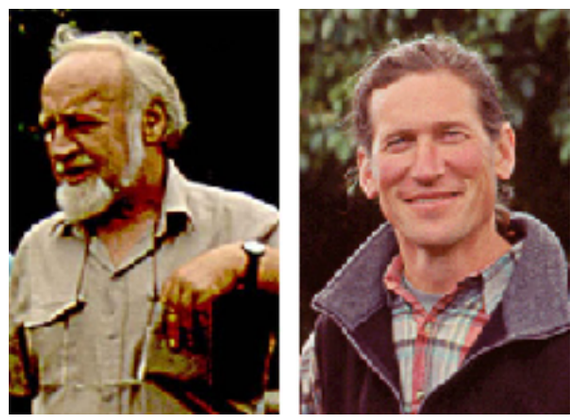
- Rosa *et al.* (2018): “…childhood experiences in nature seem to have a lasting effect until adulthood, encouraging nature experiences later in life, which, in turn, promote pro-environmentalism” (2018, p. 8).

- The education system has a key role to play in providing access to - and understanding of - the natural world.



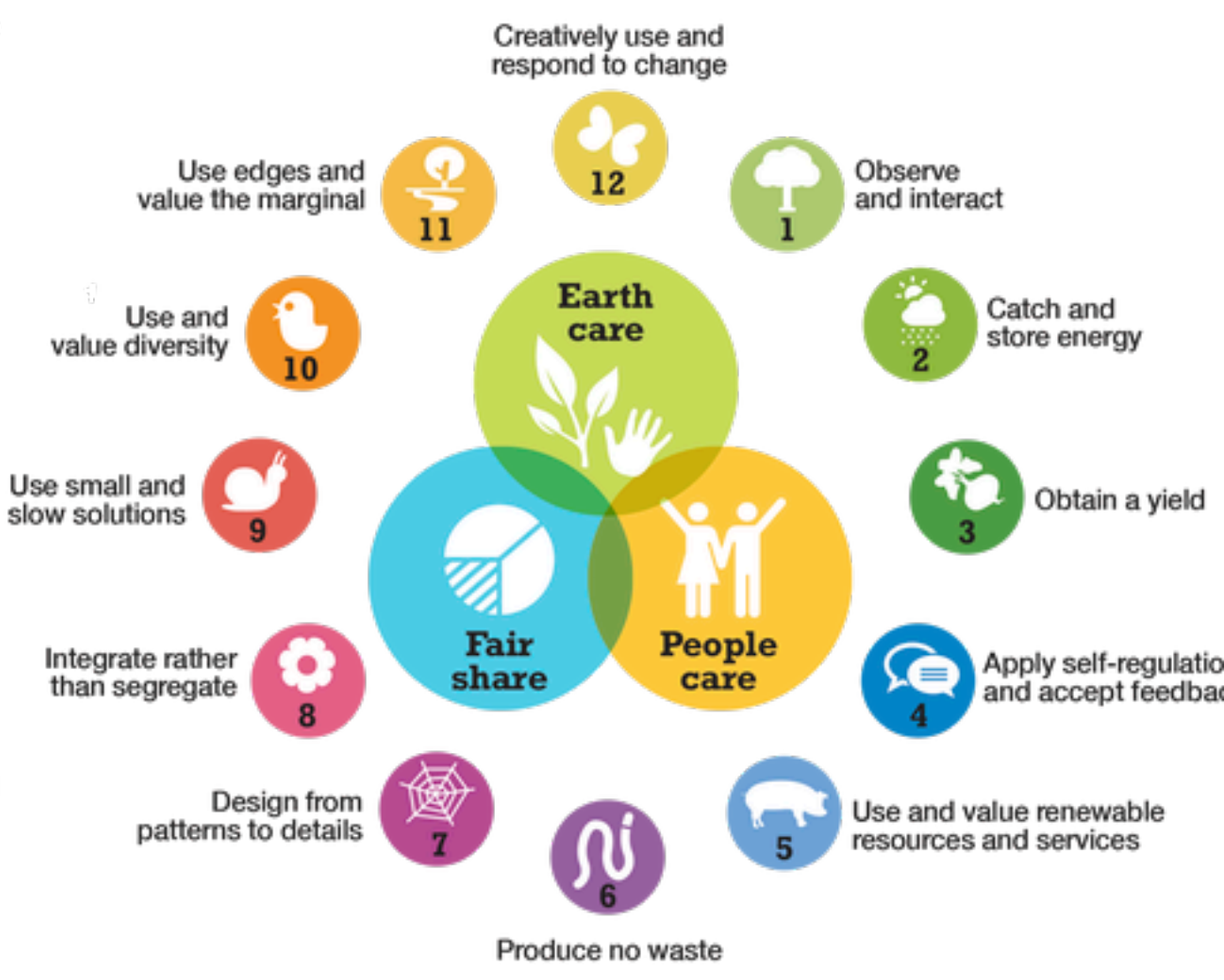
Permaculture

- Permaculture is a process for designing sustainable and regenerative garden systems by following the principles of ecology. It was developed in the 1970s by Australian ecologist Bill Mollison (1928-2016) and his student David Holmgren (Mollison & Holmgren, 1990).



- The term itself derives from the conjunction of the words 'permanent' and 'culture' (or 'agriculture'), so Permaculture could be understood as a design system for creating ecologically rooted 'permanent cultures' that are 'regenerative,' rather than just ‘sustainable.'

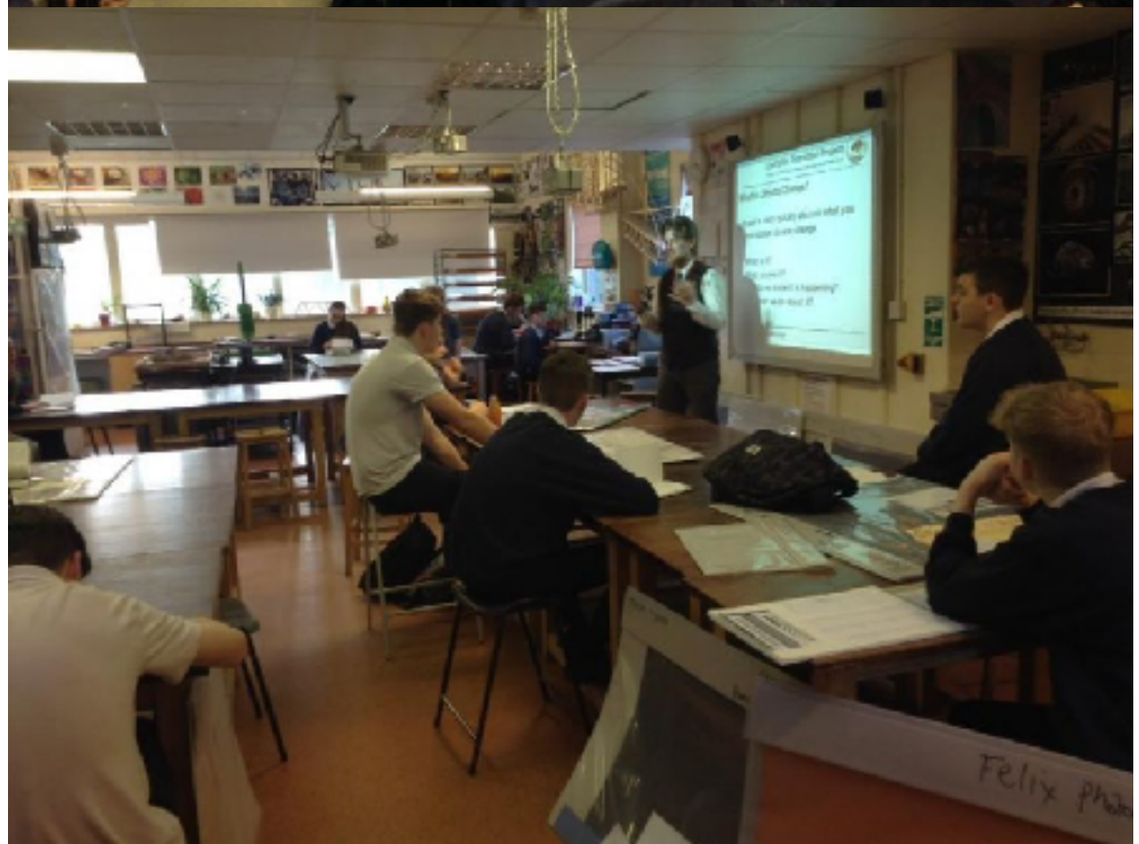
- One of the most popular formulations of Permaculture makes use of twelve key design principles (see below), and three ethical precepts (Earth care, People care, Fair share), drawing primarily from the work of David Holmgren, and in particular from his book *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability* (2006).



One School One Planet

- Project initiated by Steve Jones and *Sector39*.
- Permaculture teaching enterprise, built on 25 years of practical permaculture experience.
- Connecting local and global contexts through working in Wales and Uganda.
- 3 year project (2016-2019).
- Exploring ways to integrate permaculture principles into mainstream education curriculum.
- How do we fit something as complex, multidisciplinary and interconnected as permaculture into the mainstream, compartmentalised curriculum?

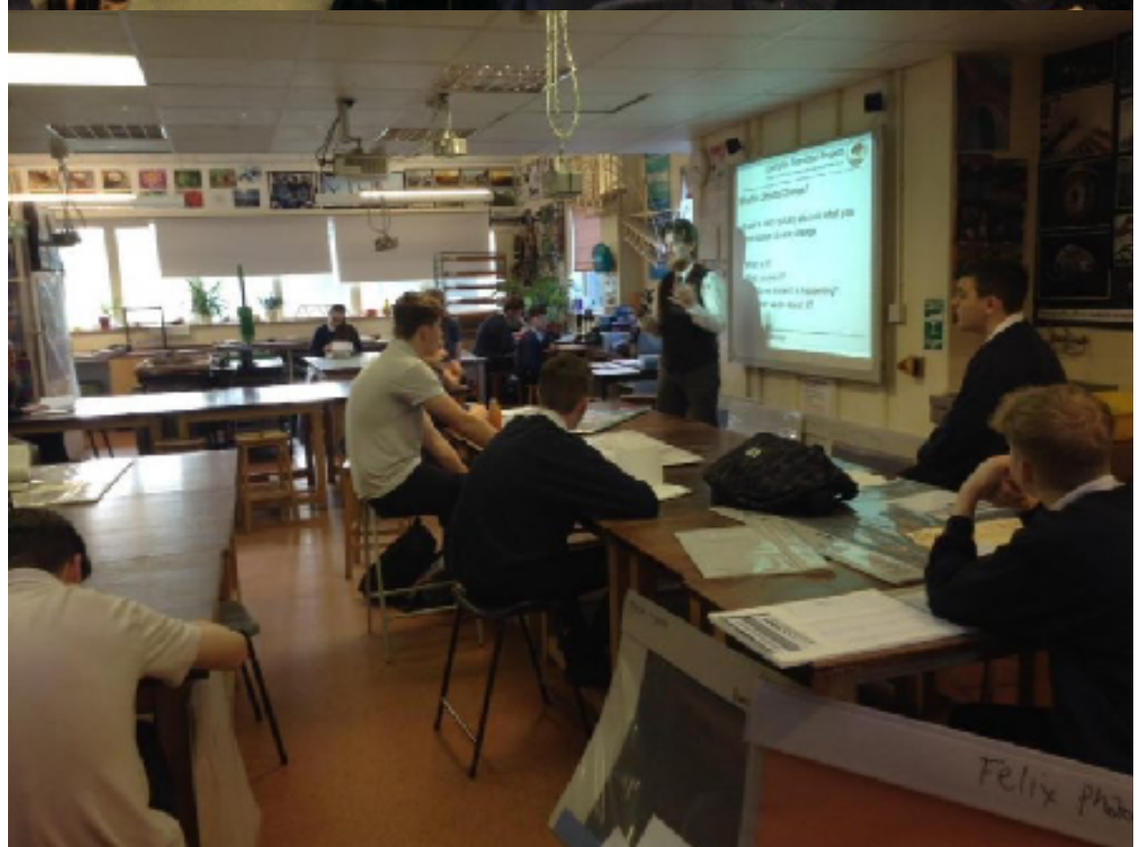




One School One Planet

- Llanfyllin High School has about 1,000 students.
- From the surrounding areas, and across the border in Shropshire.
- Bilingual.
- Major hub in the local community.
- Large consumer of resources.
- Wide reach.





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- We were able to work primarily with GCSE Land-Based Studies and Welsh Baccalaureate students.





Organic Work Process

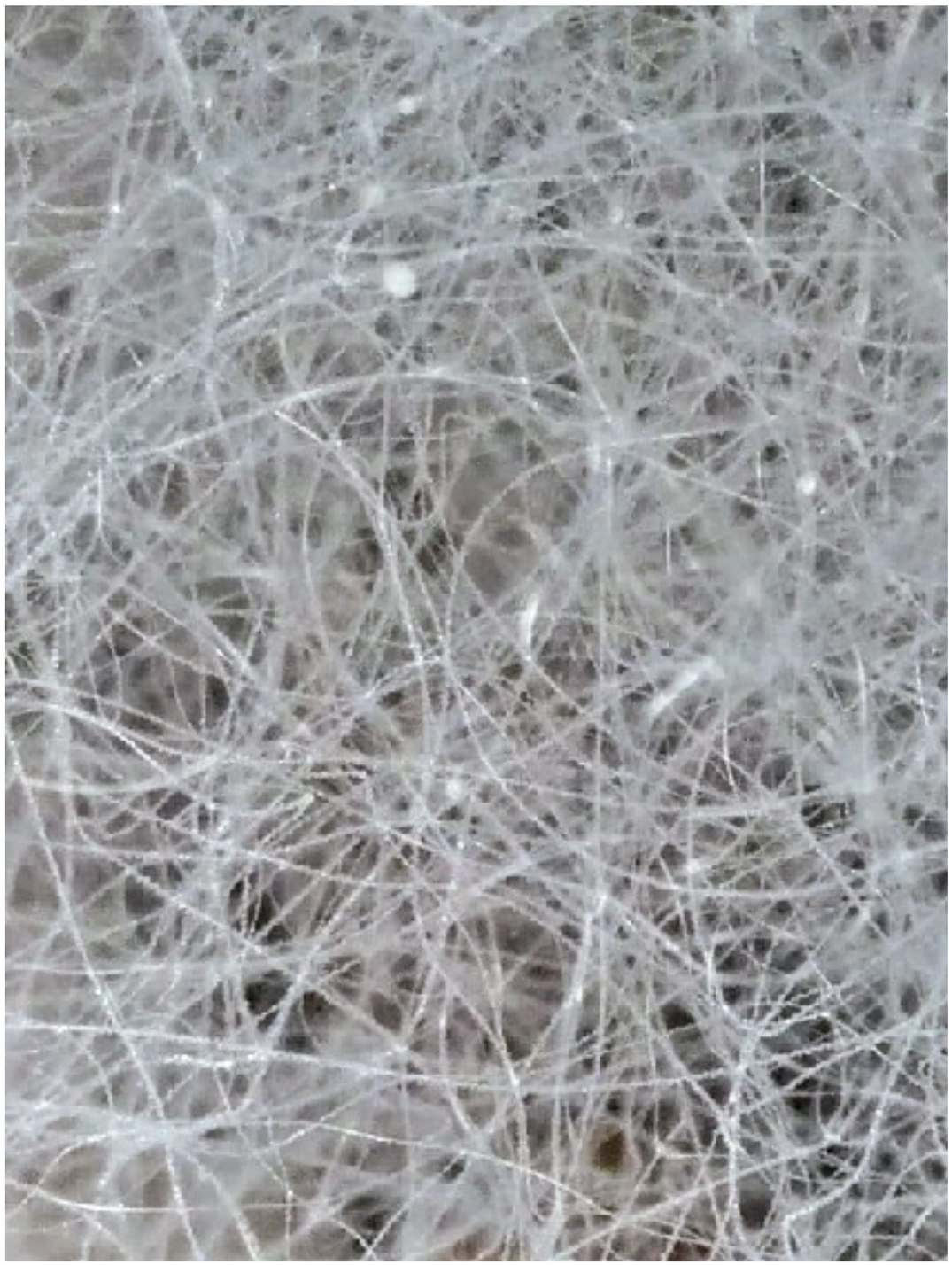
- Emulate natural interconnected systems.

- Networking with other groups, individuals and projects with similar aims.

- Building nodes within the community - school, community garden, community food growing, etc.

- Building links between school subjects.

- Stacking functions - multiple outputs for activities.



Talking about ecology…

"Soil is the ground/surface of the earth. It can be found almost everywhere and is in no short supply. It is one of the most common things used in farming and agriculture."

"Soil is literally my life because my family are farmers."

"Mud, dirt, filth, messy, worms, earth, wet, moist…"

"Soil means dirt, crops and ploughing a field."

"My family has an allotment so we use compost for our gardening. We have fresh vegetables and fruit."

"Soil is decomposed leaves and twigs which are decomposed by worms. Soil is vital to us…we use it to grow food which allows us to eat and live and thrive. Soil helps us to grow our healthy and unhealthy food. Soil allows people to have a living and a job selling their produce. Soil can be used to hide things and protect things. It is a home for animals…"

Cae Bodfach Community Orchard

- Work commenced in 2014 - local volunteers.

- Land was donated to Llanfyllin Community by the Bodfach Trust and estate.

- Permission from the Town Council before any work could start on the site.

- To create a ‘Food Forest.’




Google earth Map, with location of proposed Forest Garden area superimposed
The red dots denote power lines and black, boundaries of the Bodfach field area
Green dots show existing fruit tree plantings

Cae Bodfach Community Orchard

- **Stacked Functions:**
- Community Hub.
- Outdoor Classroom.
- Volunteer work.
- Habitat creation.
- Heritage Apples Varieties.
- Community Food Resource.









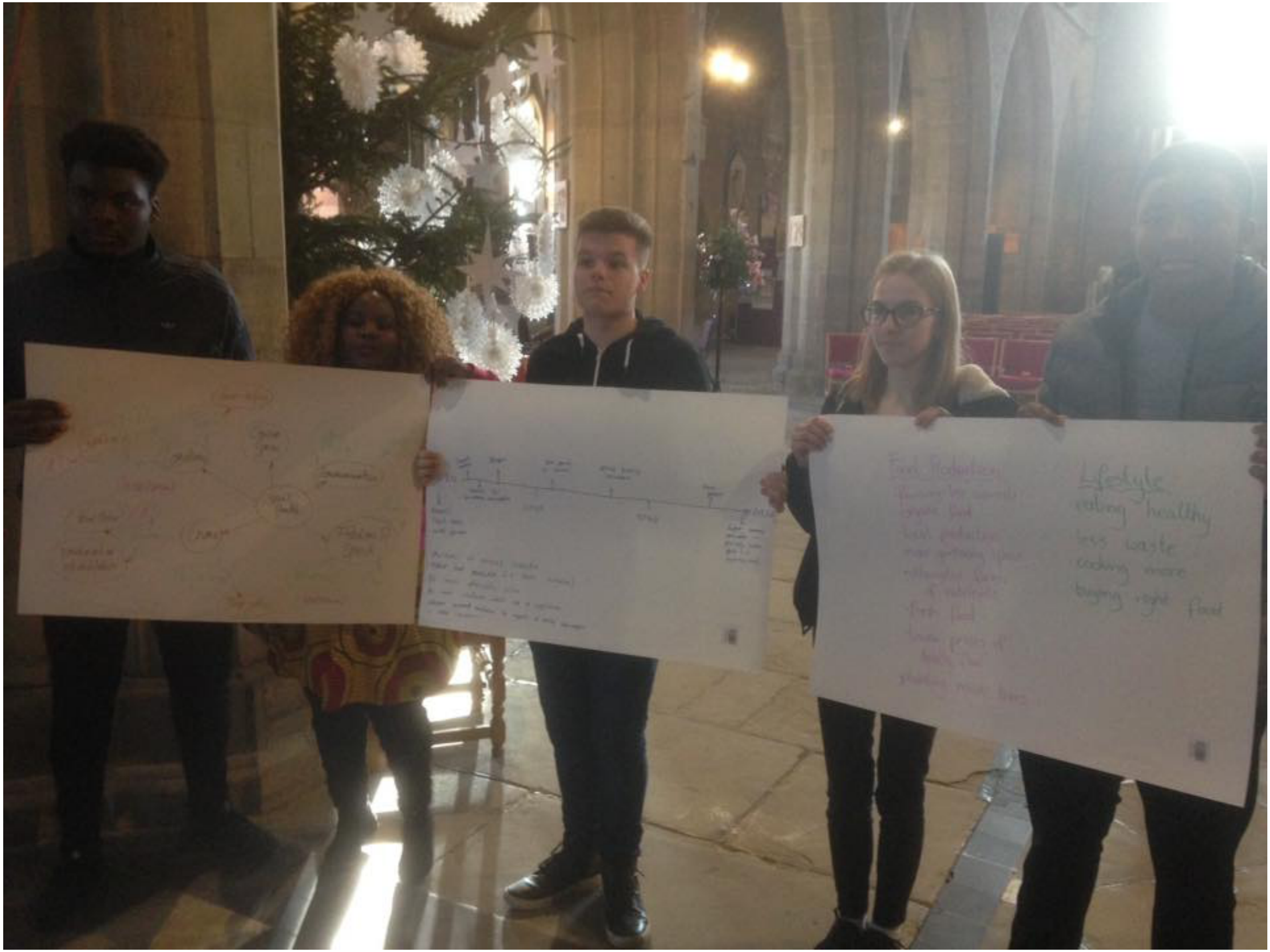


Outdoor Teaching

- “School grounds and schoolyards are prime milieu that serve as the basis for ecological alternatives that contrast dominant mechanistic metaphors. Not only can learning gardens enhance mastery over literacy, numeracy, as well as life skills, but for us, soil and learning gardens also serve as animate options for reorienting the metaphoric imagination guiding modern education” (Williams & Brown, 2012, p. 8).




Cae Bodfach Herb Garden
90% of herbs LOST
Mint
Cae Bodfach Orchard
Llanfyllin


Lifestyle
eating healthy
less waste
eating more
buying right food

Outcomes…

I've learned about how climate change applies to people in the real world and what I need to do to stop it.

The information given has been interesting. We should work toward applying the information we have learned to solving problems.

Learned a lot about the environment. Learned a lot about the community. Learned about things I didn't know before.

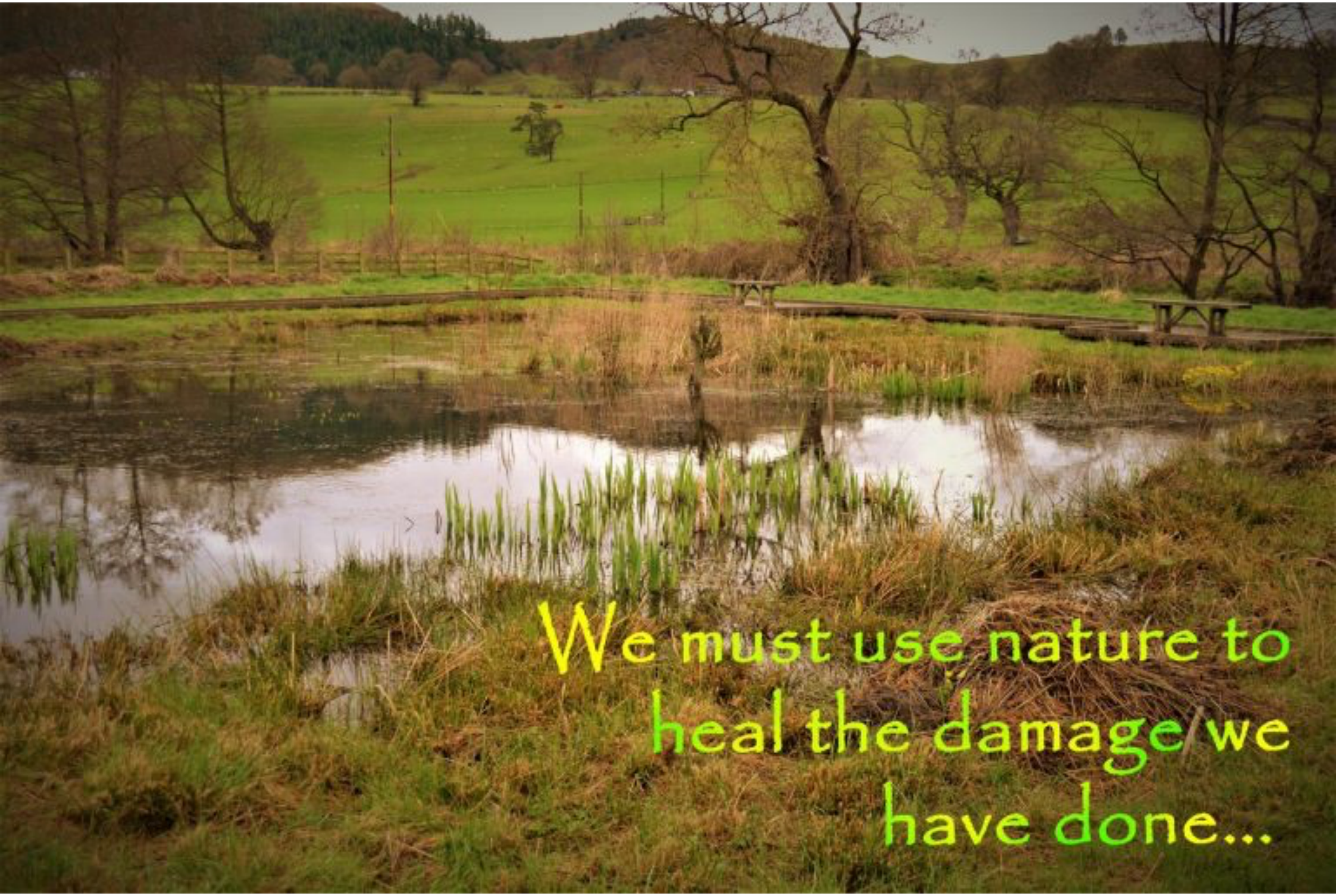
Spaceship Earth



We are all here

TOGETHER.


One School One Planet
Spaceship Earth
We are all here
Together.


We must use nature to
heal the damage we
have done...

OUR HOME TOO

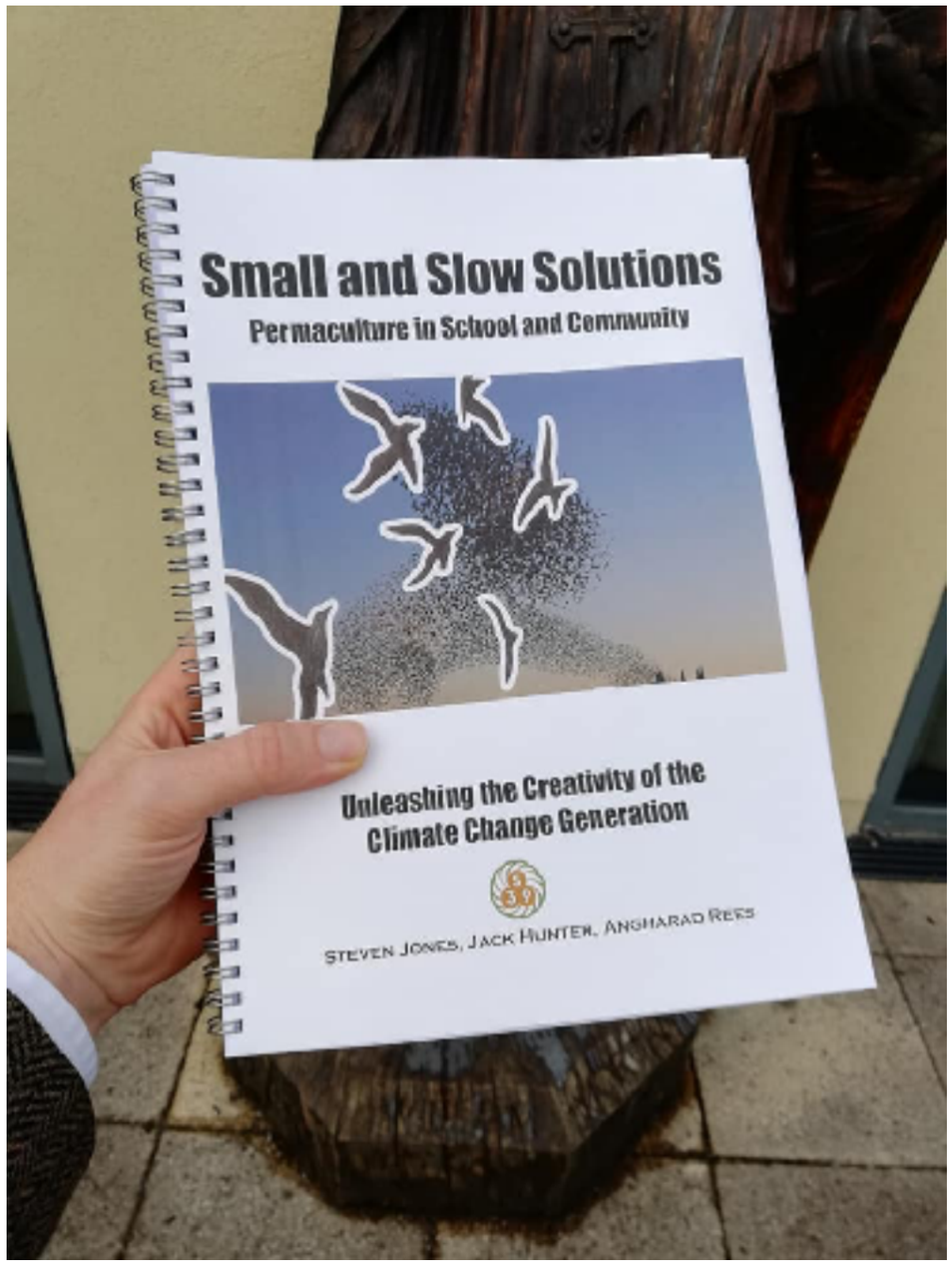



PROTECT THEIR HOME


IT IS UP
TO US

Conclusions

- The education system is not designed for ‘joined up learning.’
- There is need for a cross-curricular awareness and understanding of ecology.
- It invites multiple disciplinary perspectives.
- Outdoor work can serve multiple functions - nature connection, exercise, learning, habitat restoration, etc.
- As we have seen, these kinds of activities can lead to ‘spiritual’ transformation of individuals and communities (e.g. Botelho *et al.*).



Llanfyllin in Transition - Building Resilient Networks for the Future



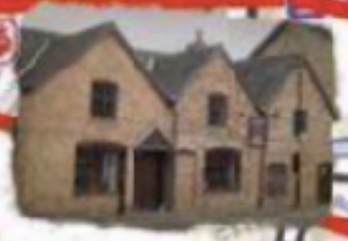
Llanfyllin Workhouse
* Historic building saved by the community as an asset
* Community space and garden with History Centre





The Cross Keys
* Community space
* Hosting conversations on climate change, food resilience, housing, farming, and so on.

Llanfyllin High School Fruit Tree Guild
* Illustrates principles of ecology and co-operation
* Ddraig Goch variety apple surrounded by companion plants with practical uses.



Llanfyllin Wetlands
* Reed-bed filtration system to purify run-off from the town into the River Cain
* Enhancing biodiversity and wildlife habitat
* Carbon capture



Dolen Ffermio
* Llanfyllin based chatity, forging links with communities in Africa
* Links Llanfyllin to the global dimension

Dolen Ffermio
Farming Link



Cae Bodfach Community Garden
* Over 100 heritage variety apple trees
* Medicinal Herb and Dye Garden
* Permaculture food forest
* Living Willow Dome
* Enhancing biodiversity and wildlife habitat
* Carbon capture

One School One Planet

S39

arwain

Powys

To find out more visit:
www.llanfyllin.sector39.co.uk



Philosophical Gardens

- Japanese Buddhist Zen gardens are a classic example.

- Zen gardens usually only employ gravel, stones and moss to create dramatic landscapes in miniature.

- Sean McGovern argues that this is “a way for complex philosophical perceptions and religious ideals to become tangible in topographical text form” (McGovern, 2004).

- Zen gardens can be understood as three-dimensional koans - as puzzles or riddles, often without a solution, that are used to stimulate thought and ultimately contribute towards enlightenment.

- Gardens can be an expression of a particular philosophy/ecosophy.












Sacred Gardening

- There are long traditions around the world of using gardens as ‘ante-chambers to the netherworld’ (Conan, 2007).

- Ancient Greeks worshipped in Groves, for Assyrians and Egyptians gardens were ritual spaces for interacting with the gods (Naydler, 2011).

- Gardens can be conceived as ‘hybrid’ places (Cooper, 2018) - where nature and culture meet - liminal zones where interactions take place.

- The Fairy Census (Young, 2018) reveals a high proportion of fairy experiences take place in gardens or woodland areas - are these interactions with spirits of place? Imaginal engagement with plant minds?



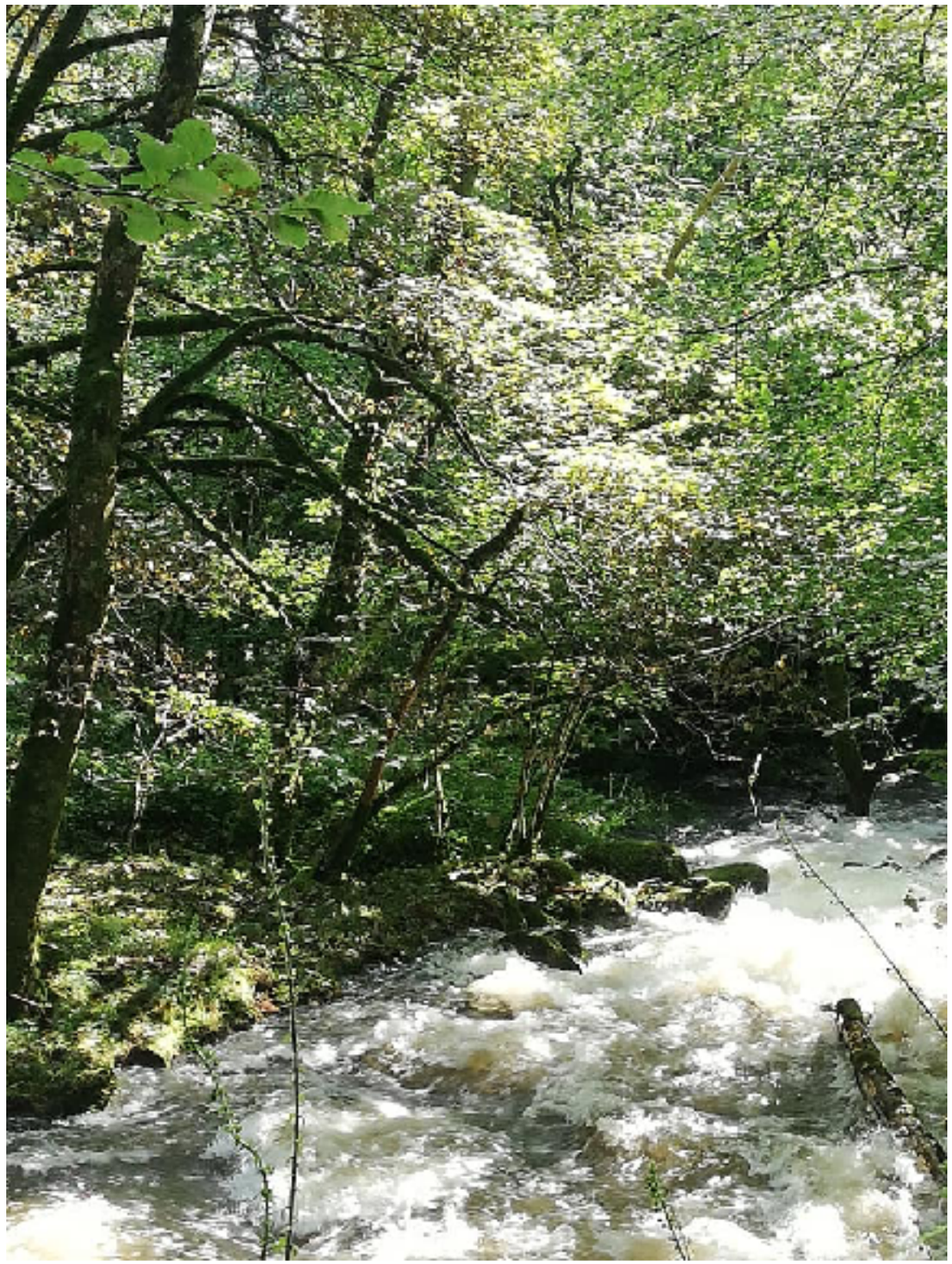
Fostering Psychodiversity

- If plants, animals and spirits are ‘persons’ too, then they are also minds.

- The biodiversity crisis is also, therefore, a psychodiversity crisis - different ways of living, thinking and being are being lost at an unprecedented rate.

- We have a responsibility to promote biodiversity and psychodiversity.

- Gardens are the ideal place to foster psychodiversity and engage in relationships with nature.











Spirit Houses

- *San phra phum* - Thai “Spirit Houses.”

- “…the ornate shrines which adorn many house compounds in contemporary urban Thailand tie into local understandings of the social character of places. It is suggested that the persistence of spirit houses can be partly understood through their roles as mediators of the phenomenological experience of certain places. Spirit houses are one part of a gathering process that imbues places with significant meaning. The shrines exemplify that culturally specific interactions and engagements with spirits associated with certain places influence how the phenomenological qualities of these places are constructed and experienced” (Pearce, 2015).



Elf Houses



Bug Hotels

- “…factors potentially contributing to biodiversity: plant-containers, compost, organic materials such as fallen branches, leaves or decomposing wood, wild food sources (i.e. berry carrying shrubs), water-features such as fountains, ponds or bird-baths, animal feeders and nesting facilities such as bird-houses or insect hotels…” (Beumer & Martens, 2014, p. 10).



Creating Habitat





Fairies at the Bottom of the Garden

- The notion might conjure up thoughts of the infamous Cottingley photographs taken in the ‘beck’ at the bottom of a Yorkshire garden by two young girls, which were first popularised in Strand Magazine by Arthur Conan Doyle one hundred years ago (Cooper, 1997).

- The association is much older, e.g. 17th Century manuscript in the Bodleian Library:

  “…they say they can enrich a man whom they effect [and] have power to hurt [and] kill whosoever [displeases] them, for which they came into any place w[h]ere they thought fairies use[d] to be, as gardens, meadows, w[h]ere green rings of [grass] were…which they call the fairie bord…” (Harms, 2018, p. 196).

- The wild places at the bottom of the garden are left untended - they are complex, biodiverse, psychodiverse - are we more likely to have encounters in these kinds of places?



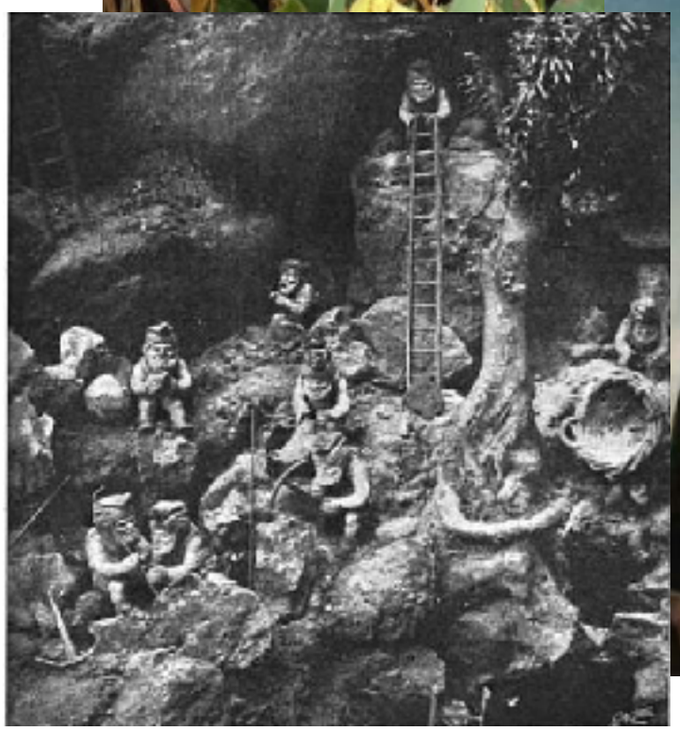
Garden Gnomes

- During the nineteenth century the association between faeries and gardens was expanded upon by Spiritualists who were keen to encourage faerie presences in their own gardens.

- The humble garden gnome, for instance, was originally intended as a means to attract the little people back into the rapidly expanding number sub-urban gardens in Britain.

- Sir Charles Isham (1819-1903), a landscape gardener and member of the British National Association of Spiritualists, is widely credited with introducing garden gnomes to the United Kingdom after creating an epic display of busily mining gnomes in his garden at Lamport Hall in Northamptonshire in 1847 (Way, 2009, p. 11).

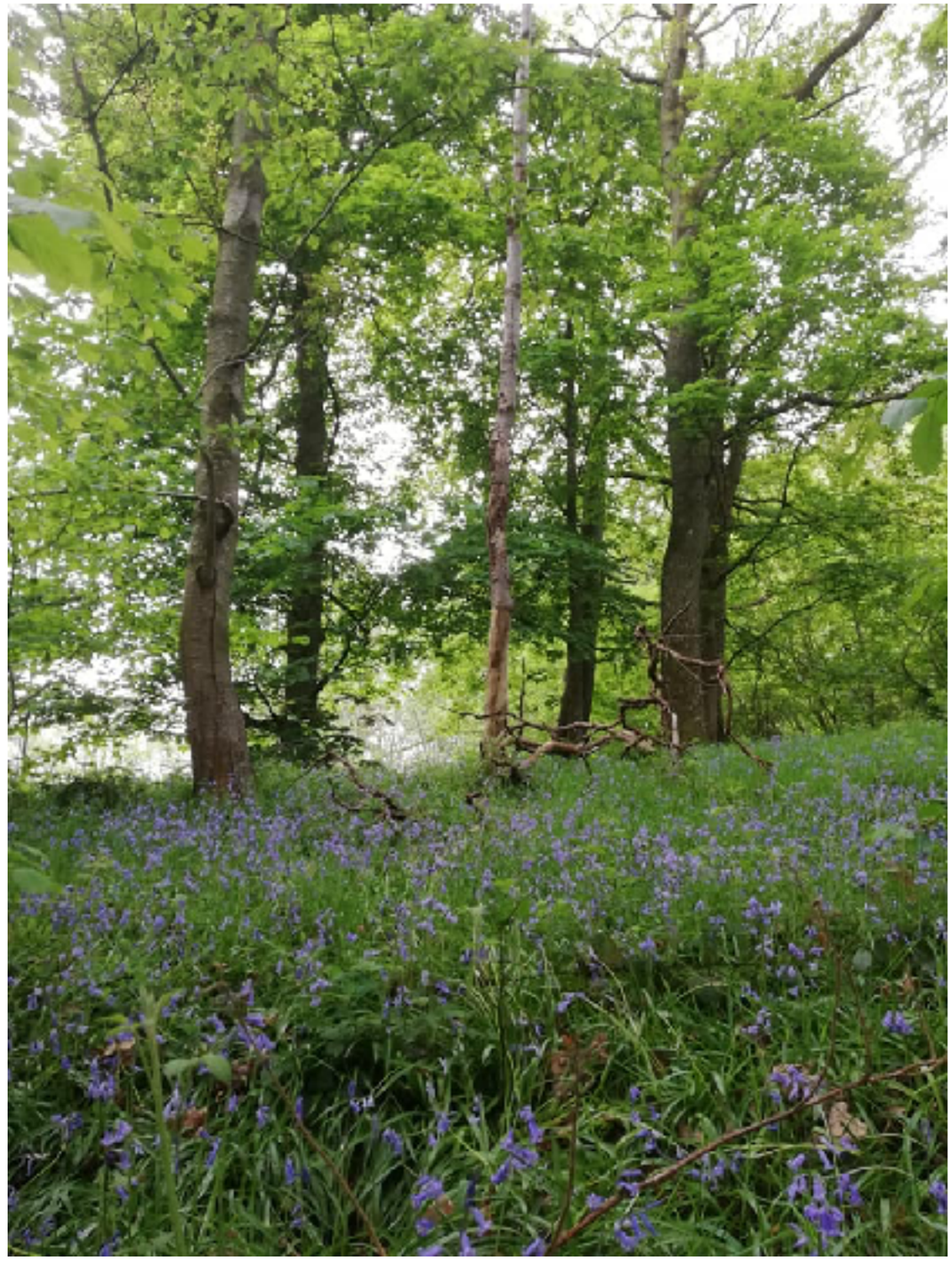






Re-Wilding and Re-Enchantment

- “To feel enchanted is to step through a hidden portal into another way of seeing, into a new reality, where the reasonable, the certain, the measurable, and the predictable give way to the awesome, the wonderful, the delightful, the paradoxical, and the uncertain – and perhaps even the longing of the soul for some other kind of life beyond the exigencies of the everyday” (Voss & Wilson, 2017, p. 13).



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