

Portfolio of 3 parts:

1. Reflective Script – 7-minute recorded presentation
2. Academic Evaluation – 13 minutes recorded presentation
3. Reference List

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

Reflective Script

For my John Muir Award, I chose to explore my own garden as my natural environment. I selected my garden because it is easily accessible and provides a variety of natural habitats within a small space. I wanted to show that meaningful connections with nature can be made without travelling to large parks or nature reserves. My garden has allowed me to develop a greater appreciation for the biodiversity that exists close to home. The garden has been part of my home for 25 years and has changed over time. It has been maintained through regular gardening, with different flowers, shrubs, and other plants added over the years. As the vegetation has become more established, the garden has attracted a range of wildlife, including birds, insects, and small animals. While it is a managed environment, it continues to provide valuable habitats and food sources for local wildlife. My garden receives full sun and shade throughout the day and changes noticeably with the seasons. These seasonal changes make it an ideal location for ongoing observation and exploration.

Before beginning this project, I viewed my garden simply as an outdoor space. However, by observing it more closely, I have developed a greater understanding of the wildlife it supports, recognised the importance of small green spaces for biodiversity, and built a stronger connection with the natural environment.

The purpose of the explore section was to explore my garden in more detail and gain a better understanding of the plants, wildlife, and natural processes that occur within it. During my exploration I observed and identified birds, insects, and other wildlife at different times of the day using the RSPB Pocket Guide to British Birds to help me. I identified plants, flowers, trees, and shrubs using the google lens app. I took photographs to document changes and wildlife activity. I recorded weather conditions and considered how they affected the garden. I looked for signs of animal activity, like nests, webs and feathers and I also compared different areas of the garden to see where attracted the most wildlife. Some observations that I made included:

- The types of birds that regularly visited the garden. These birds were house sparrows, nuthatches, thrush's, black birds, wood pigeons, blue tits and sometimes coal tits.
- Bees and butterflies collecting nectar from flowering plants.

- Spiders creating webs in sheltered areas.
- Changes in plant growth.
- Areas that attracted the greatest amount of wildlife.

By spending time observing my garden, I developed a greater understanding of local biodiversity and the importance of small green spaces. I learned that even a relatively small garden can provide food, shelter, and breeding habitats for a wide range of species. I also gained a better understanding of; the importance of native plants for supporting pollinators, how seasonal changes and weather conditions affect the wildlife activity and the natural environment. It was clear to see that during a recent heatwave the plants struggled and needed watering 2-3 times a day. I noticed that when they hadn't been watered, they had drooped a lot.

During this project, I developed several practical and personal skills, including; observation skills, species identification, photography and recording evidence, patience and attention to detail, research skills and reflective thinking. These skills helped me to become more confident in recognising wildlife and understanding the natural environment around me.

The conservation stage of the John Muir Award focused on improving my garden as a habitat for wildlife and ensuring that it remains a healthy and sustainable environment. Through a series of small but meaningful actions, I aimed to encourage biodiversity, protect existing habitats, and create a space that supports a variety of plants and animals. These actions included:

- Adding bird feeders and ensuring they were regularly topped up.
- Providing a shallow water bowl for birds and insects to use as a bird bath or to drink out of.
- Maintaining areas of longer grass to provide shelter for insects.
- Leaving small piles of branches and wood to create natural habitats.
- Watering plants responsibly during dry periods.

Since making these changes, I have noticed several positive differences within my garden. There appears to be an increase in wildlife activity, particularly from birds

and pollinating insects. Some plants have become more established, providing additional food and shelter for wildlife. The garden also feels healthier and more diverse, with different areas supporting a range of species. Although some changes have been small, they demonstrate that conservation does not always require large-scale projects.

Conservation is an ongoing process rather than a one-time activity. To continue protecting and improving my garden, I plan to:

- Keep bird feeders and water sources clean and regularly maintained.
- Allow parts of the garden to grow naturally during certain times of the year.
- Continue composting garden waste to improve soil quality.
- Monitor wildlife throughout the seasons and record any changes.
- Encourage family members to take part in caring for the garden.

These actions will help maintain a healthy habitat and continue supporting biodiversity in the future.

The final stage of my John Muir Award involved sharing my experiences, knowledge, and learning with others. Throughout this project, I shared my progress with my family by showing them photographs, discussing the wildlife I had identified, and explaining the conservation activities I had carried out in the garden. I also talked about the importance of creating wildlife-friendly spaces and how simple actions can make a positive difference to the environment. Sharing my experiences helped them become more aware of the wildlife living in our own garden and encouraged us to spend more time appreciating nature together. It also gave me the opportunity to reflect on everything I had learned throughout the project.

Completing this project helped me recognise that the wildlife found in my garden is connected to a much wider natural environment. The knowledge I gained can be applied when visiting local parks and woodlands such as Clyne Gardens and Singleton Park, where similar habitats and species can be observed. I would like to continue exploring local natural areas to compare the biodiversity found in my garden with larger habitats.

The John Muir Award has taught me the importance of taking time to observe nature, understanding how ecosystems work, and recognising that everyone has a role to play in protecting the environment. I have learned that conservation does not always require large projects; even small actions can make a meaningful contribution to biodiversity. I believe that if more people made these small changes, it would have a positive impact on biodiversity within local communities.

Academic Evaluation

Sustainability has become a central principle within education as societies increasingly recognise the need to address environmental, social and economic challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and social inequality. The concept extends beyond environmental protection and promotes a balanced approach that enables current generations to meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. This widely accepted definition originates from the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987), which established sustainability as a global responsibility rather than simply an environmental concern. Since its publication, sustainability has evolved into an educational philosophy that encourages individuals to become informed, responsible citizens capable of contributing positively to society and the natural environment.

International commitment to sustainable development continued through the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The summit resulted in Agenda 21, which identified education as a key driver in achieving sustainable societies by encouraging environmental awareness, social justice and active participation in decision-making. More recently, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, have further strengthened this commitment by providing seventeen interconnected global goals that seek to eradicate poverty, protect the planet and promote peace and prosperity. Goal 4, *Quality Education*, specifically highlights the importance of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), ensuring that learners acquire the knowledge, skills and values needed to promote sustainable lifestyles and global citizenship (United Nations, 2015). These international developments demonstrate that sustainability is no longer viewed as an optional addition to education but as an essential component of preparing children to live within an increasingly complex and environmentally challenged world.

Within early childhood education, sustainability is particularly significant because attitudes, values and behaviours begin to develop during the early years. Davis (2015) argues that young children are capable of understanding complex environmental issues when learning is meaningful, experiential and connected to

their everyday lives. Rather than protecting children from environmental challenges, early years practitioners should empower them to become active participants in caring for their environment. This represents a shift away from traditional environmental education towards Education for Sustainability (EfS), where children are viewed as capable citizens who contribute to sustainable futures through exploration, collaboration and decision-making. However, critical perspectives suggest that sustainability education should not simply encourage environmentally friendly behaviours but should also develop children's critical thinking, problem-solving and understanding of social responsibility (Elliott and Davis, 2009). Consequently, effective sustainability education requires practitioners to facilitate meaningful experiences rather than relying solely on factual teaching.

In Wales, sustainability has become embedded within both educational policy and legislation. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides a statutory commitment to improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales through sustainable development. The Act adopts the Brundtland definition by requiring organisations to meet present needs while safeguarding the needs of future generations and introduces five ways of working: long-term thinking, prevention, integration, collaboration and involvement. These principles place sustainability at the centre of decision-making and establish a clear expectation that education should prepare children to contribute positively to society and the environment. The Welsh approach to sustainability has also been shaped by Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC), which promotes environmental responsibility alongside social justice, equality and global awareness. Although ESDGC has evolved within the Curriculum for Wales, its core principles remain evident throughout the curriculum's four purposes. In particular, learners are encouraged to become ethical, informed citizens who understand the impact of their actions on both local and global communities and are prepared to respond to environmental challenges responsibly. Furthermore, the Curriculum for Wales emphasises that learning should be authentic, purposeful and rooted in real-life experiences, encouraging practitioners to use outdoor environments and local communities as meaningful contexts for learning. These principles are equally reflected within the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, where

play-based, experiential learning supports children's developing understanding of themselves, others and the natural world.

A distinctive feature of the Welsh curriculum is the concept of cynefin, which refers to a child's sense of belonging and connection to the places, people and communities that shape their identity. Developing an understanding of cynefin encourages children to value their local environment while recognising their responsibility towards wider ecological and global communities. This aligns closely with sustainability education, as children who develop strong emotional connections with nature are more likely to demonstrate environmentally responsible attitudes throughout their lives. Experiences such as exploring gardens, parks and local natural environments therefore support not only environmental knowledge but also children's emotional wellbeing, identity and sense of place.

Nature-based learning experiences, such as those undertaken through the John Muir Award, exemplify many of the pedagogical principles associated with Education for Sustainability. The award encourages participants to discover, explore, conserve and share experiences within natural environments, promoting active participation rather than passive learning. This hands-on, child-led approach reflects experiential theories of learning, where children construct understanding through direct interaction with real environments. Such approaches encourage enquiry, observation, problem-solving, collaboration and reflection, enabling children to develop meaningful relationships with nature whilst fostering environmental stewardship. Importantly, these experiences also support holistic development by integrating physical activity, wellbeing, scientific enquiry and social learning within authentic contexts.

The experiences undertaken during the John Muir Award demonstrate key principles of Education for Sustainability (EfS), particularly through practical learning, developing meaningful relationships with nature and encouraging active environmental stewardship. EfS promotes learning through experience, enabling children to develop values, skills and dispositions that support lifelong environmental responsibility (Davis, 2015). Exploring, conserving and reflecting upon my own garden illustrates how authentic engagement with nature can support these aspirations while also reflecting established theories of early childhood education.

A defining characteristic of the John Muir Award is its emphasis on practical, experiential learning. Throughout the project I observed wildlife, identified plants, documented seasonal changes and carried out conservation activities within my garden. These experiences required active participation and therefore reflect Dewey's (1938) belief that meaningful learning occurs through interaction with the environment. Experiential learning allows children to make meaningful connections between abstract concepts such as biodiversity or conservation and their everyday experiences.

This approach is particularly relevant in early childhood education, where young children learn most effectively through play, exploration and active investigation (Siraj-Blatchford, Smith and Samuelsson, 2010). The Curriculum for Wales similarly promotes authentic, enquiry-based learning, encouraging practitioners to create opportunities for children to investigate real environments (Welsh Government, 2021). My exploration of a familiar garden demonstrated that valuable sustainability learning does not require access to extensive natural landscapes. Repeated observations of local wildlife enabled a more detailed understanding of ecological relationships, reinforcing Davis' (2015) argument that sustainability education should begin within children's immediate environments. However, experiential learning requires skilled adult facilitation; without questioning and reflection, outdoor experiences may remain recreational rather than educational (Elliott and Davis, 2009).

A second principle underpinning both the John Muir Award and EfS is the development of meaningful relationships with nature. Spending regular time observing my garden transformed my perception of it from a simple outdoor space into an interconnected ecosystem. I began recognising habitats and relationships between plants, insects and birds. This reflects Froebel's philosophy, which viewed nature as fundamental to children's learning and holistic development. Froebel believed that direct engagement with the natural world nurtured curiosity, creativity and respect for living things, whilst encouraging children to recognise themselves as part of a wider ecological community (Bruce, 2021).

Similarly, Malaguzzi's Reggio Emilia approach positions the environment as the "third teacher", recognising that carefully considered learning environments encourage

investigation, collaboration and independent thinking (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). During my John Muir Award, the garden became an active learning environment where seasonal changes, wildlife encounters and conservation tasks created authentic opportunities for enquiry. Research suggests that emotional connection to nature during childhood can significantly influence later environmental attitudes and behaviours (Chawla, 2020). Nevertheless, Öhman (2016) argues that connection alone is insufficient; sustainability education should also encourage children to critically examine environmental issues and understand the ethical dimensions of sustainable living.

The conservation stage of the John Muir Award also supports an important aspiration of EfS by encouraging learners to take meaningful action. Through planting pollinator-friendly flowers, maintaining habitats and providing food and water for wildlife, I recognised that relatively small actions can positively influence biodiversity within my own garden. This reflects Montessori's belief that children develop responsibility through purposeful, hands-on activity that contributes to their environment (Montessori, 1967). Rather than being passive recipients of knowledge, children become active citizens capable of caring for both their immediate surroundings and the wider world.

Taking practical action also supports the concept of agency, which refers to children's capacity to influence change and participate in decisions affecting their lives and communities (United Nations, 1989). The John Muir Award recognises participants as active contributors to environmental stewardship by encouraging them to conserve natural spaces and share their learning with others. This aligns with the aspirations of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which promotes long-term thinking and collective responsibility for creating sustainable communities. Through achievable conservation activities, participants begin to understand that environmental change is often achieved through many small, consistent actions.

Overall, the experiences undertaken during the John Muir Award demonstrate how authentic, nature-based learning can effectively support the themes and aspirations of Education for Sustainability in early childhood. Through experiential learning, meaningful relationships with nature and opportunities for environmental action,

participants develop knowledge, skills and values that extend beyond environmental awareness towards responsible citizenship and lifelong stewardship.

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