

Reflection

Good morning my name is Lydia, and today I will be reflecting on my experience in participating in the John Muir award, and discussing how undertaking experiences can support the philosophy and principles of early years sustainability. The John Muir Award is an award scheme for the environment that highlights wild areas. It encourages individuals to appreciate, connect with, and take care of the natural world and to share the experience I had with others (John Muir Trust, 2019).

To reflect, I chose Sandy Water Park in Llanelli to discover and explore as part of my John Muir Award. I chose this area as I have fond memories from my childhood going for walks and picnics there in the summertime with my family. Sandy Water Park is located between the North Dock and St Elli's Bay Bistro (former discovery centre) and the Festival Fields, where the Eisteddfod has been held in the past. Sandy Water Park is a circular loop of around 2KM which circles the lake. I recently learnt that one of the world's biggest and most advanced steel mills, Duport Steel Works was connected to this lake as one of its cooling lakes. The locals referred to the works as the Klondike works as they were Llanelli's version of the gold rush (Discover Carmarthenshire, 2022).

Before my John Muir experience, I would only take notice of the ducks around the lake rather than looking at the area in depth. I would often look past the other living things, such as any birds, insects, bees, or plants. I would ignore the sight of any litter laying around, both on the path and in the water which I am now embarrassed about. There are multiple ways to get to Sandy Water Park, there's the main carpark, over the coastal bridge from the Llanelli Leisure Centre, or through a housing estate on foot, as well as from the other side of Carmarthenshire on the coastal path. When I completed my first visit to Sandy, I went through what you could call the 'back way'. As soon as I walked a little further, there was a view of the whole water park. Whereas if I entered the park from the leisure centre, coming down from the hill over the bridge, I also had a full view of the water park but at a different angle. I hadn't really thought about the difference in views from the different entrances, but as part of the John Muir Award experience I set out to connect with things I hadn't cared for before. As part of my curiosity, I noticed there were so many dandelions around the

path, some alive, some that had died off, before this experience I would not have cared for looking down at them. I also came to the realisation that I always walk around with my earbuds in listening to music, not thinking about the sounds I could potentially hear around me without them. The second day I visited Sandy Water Park was a lovely warm sunny morning, the park was quiet with just a few dog walkers, and on the way back to my car I could hear a lovely birdsong – this is when I learnt that I have probably missed out on a few lovely natural sounds, as well as hearing the trees blow in the wind. This fact inspired me to take more walks without my earbuds to take advantage of the lovely environment around me, and to hear the lovely sounds – this would probably help with my safety whilst out walking too.

I remember whilst walking back to the car from my third visit to Sandy Water Park I walked past some lovely pink flowers, and the smell on them were just gorgeous. After this I decided to download a plant identifier app on my phone to find out what they were, which I wouldn't have done before. I learnt that the flowers were Rugosa roses, and that they bloom in the summer. I hadn't been for a walk on that side of the water park for quite a while, the last time was in the winter, and I can remember how different it looks compared to spring and summer time. There were hardly any flowers that had bloomed when I walked around there in the winter, but I did not think anything of it at the time.

Taking part in the John Muir Award also made me think about children connecting with nature now in the modern years, and how it could be different to when I experienced being outdoors and connecting with nature during my childhood. From brief observations I often see parents or even children on a device whilst out and about, which could interfere with the quality of connection they have out in nature.

To conserve, I have decided to continue and try my best to recycle more at home, as well as out in the public – because if I am in doubt I always throw my litter away in the general waste option, but will now think about my actions around this. I have also planned to visit my local garden centre, to see if they have any Rugosa Rose plants I could buy to plant in my garden at home. Before this experience, I would have walked past the flowers and thought they looked nice, but never to go back to smell them and find out what they were. After I have planted my flowers I think it will remind me of my John Muir experience.

I have also decided to educate my family on the wildlife I learnt about, such as the life cycle of a greylag goose, and swans. In all the years I have been to Sandy Water Park, I do not remember ever seeing a swan laying on her eggs, or let alone any other eggs waiting to be hatched.

I have shared my scrapbook of the John Muir Award experience I had with yourself, and my family, as part of the last task in completing the award. If I was to undertake this experience again, I do not think I would change that much. I would visit Sandy Water Park in different weather conditions again, for example in the rain, my main focus was to take images and get back to the car quickly. During this visit, I also had my hood up and earbuds in, therefore do not know if I heard any animal sounds. Whereas in the sun, I took more time to inspect the things around me, such as the flowers, geese and swans, as well as the litter. I also visited without my earbuds and enjoyed hearing the ducks, birds, and even the bumblebee – which I would have noticed if I was using them.

To conclude my reflection, taking part in the John Muir Award has enabled me to appreciate the smaller things, especially whilst out and about on a nature walk or run.

Academic Presentation

Sustainability

UCLA Sustainability (2024) describes sustainability as “the balance between the environment, equity, and economy”. The Our Common Future Report commissioned by Brundtland, also known as the Brundtland Report explains sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2024). This links to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, as it sets desires, authority, and a legal duty to enhance the well-being on the social, cultural, environmental, and financial aspects. The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (2024) explains that the 44 public bodies in Wales are required by the Act to consider the long-term effects of their actions, to collaborate more effectively with individuals, communities, and one another, and to prevent enduring issues including poverty, health disparities, and

climate change, for a more prosperous Wales. Additionally, countries across the world are showing interest in the Act, as it presents a significant chance to positively impact present and future generations in a long-lasting manner (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2024a). Moreover, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 also correlates with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), approved by The United Nations in 2015 as a global call to action to end poverty, protect our planet, and guarantee that by 2030 all people live in peace and prosperity (United Nations Development Programme, 2024).

Early childhood education is the ideal time to begin teaching and practicing sustainability due to the severity of the climate change issue and the necessity for a national and cross-generational approach (King, no date). The Department for Education (2023) suggests early experience with sustainability principles can help educators establish a lifetime commitment to social responsibility and environmental stewardship. Instilling a feeling of awe and respect for the environment in children throughout their early years is extremely valuable, as they are naturally curious and eager to learn about the world around them (Benner, Thornton and Crosnoe, 2017). Boyd *et al.* (2021) adds that there are various ways to incorporate sustainability into an early childhood curriculum. Some of the more creative ways include using sustainability themes in storytelling, art, and music, as well as practical activities like gardening and recycling. MacAuslan (2018) explains that sustainability has many elements and is difficult to define especially in the early years. Seeley (2024) states that to support children comprehend difficult ideas like biodiversity, climate change, and resource conservation, educators can choose terminology and activities that are appropriate for the children's ages.

UNESCO

The earth's ecosystems have been impacted by human activity as a whole, making it increasingly difficult to reverse the changes that threaten our very survival (UNESCO, no date). Momtaz and Zobaidul-Kabir (2013) explain that one of the key documents from the 1992 Rio Summit on Environment and Development of the United Nations is Agenda 21. Agenda 21 is a comprehensive action plan that has been endorsed by the UN summit to be implemented worldwide, nationally, and locally by governments, significant groups, and organisations of the United Nations

System in every area where human activity affects the environment. Borg (2017) states that children are seen as significant contributors to the achievement of a sustainable future by embracing environmental responsibility and making improvements to the area around them. Additionally, in order to ensure future sustainability, Agenda 21 states that the interests and concerns of children be taken into account in all environmental protection and development actions (Biagini and Sagar, 2004). Children have the right to voice their opinions, feelings, and wants on issues that impact them, as stated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (National Children's Bureau, 2021). The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland (no date) states that every child is entitled to and should make a contribution to their own future as well as participate in conversations about the environment and climate change. Children can learn to make their own judgements in accordance with Article 12, which grants them the right to have their thoughts and decisions respected, by participating in outdoor activities such as the John Muir Award.

Education

UNESCO's education sector response to the pressing and significant difficulties the world currently faces is referred to as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The University of Plymouth (no date) states that through ESD, everyone can develop the values, attitudes, and knowledge needed to create a sustainable future. According to Patterson (2024), integrating ESD into all students' curricula could have a significant impact on how society progresses towards the sustainable development goals, which will therefore enhance the quality of life for future generations and protecting the environment from further damage. In an effort to promote the wellbeing of individuals in the future, as well as that of other living things and the environment, Wales supported this and designed the Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) policy, as a cross curricular approach to involve pupils and educators in the values and principles of sustainable development and citizenship (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). The development of "ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the World" is one of the four goals of the new Curriculum for Wales, and it also coincides with the cross-curricula themes of the ESDGC.

The John Muir Award provides experiences such as litter picking which promotes one of the ESD goals of taking action (Rieckmann, 2018). According to Annan-Diab and Molinari (2017), picking up litter as a taking action learning exercise improves a child's engagement with the environment, which in turn supports their ownership of it and promotes a commitment to sustainability. Additionally, this is the start of their climate change and the development of green skills (Boyd *et al.* 2022). According to Education Scotland (2014), it is considered crucial to incorporate litter picking into a thorough sustainability education curriculum in order to maximise the educational benefits of this activity for teaching children about sustainability. To give context and relevance to the learning objectives from Curriculum for Wales as an example, schools could integrate litter picking into their science, and mathematics subjects. Picking up litter can serve as a starting point for discussions by practitioners on pollution, waste management, conservation, and the effects of unsustainable practices on the environment (Brown, Ham and Hughes, 2010). Furthermore, the UN Environment Programme (2018) states that this can also serve as a starting point for a discussion on recycling, how to achieve it to a high standard at school/settings to a high standard and why it is important.

However, although it is evident how important it is to teach sustainability in the early years, there are additional barriers and factors to consider. The University of Leeds (2024) states that for teaching practices to effectively incorporate sustainability, educators might require extra training and resources. Additionally, Tinney and Hirst (2018) recognise this, and state that it could be due to the fact practitioners believe it is too complex or extensive to incorporate in an already detailed and full curriculum. Furthermore, according to Witoszek (2018) teaching sustainability places additional responsibilities on the educator. It could be difficult for practitioners to be passionate in this subject if they have negative feelings over the inclusion of ESDGC in the curriculum.

Froebel highlighted the advantages of outdoor play for children's overall development. He proposed that practical learning opportunities, including those presented in the John Muir Award, increase children's awareness of the world by allowing them to have first-hand experiences (Tinney and Merriman, 2018). Froebel advocated an educational system that was centred on learning by experience, or

learning from the surroundings, and he emphasised the significance of the environment for children's growth (Natural England, 2011). The John Muir Award could also help achieve Article 24 of the UNCRC which states that children have the right to a healthy existence, including a clean environment. This also links with the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, as they both aim to provide education on health and wellbeing, to maintain children's health (UNICEF, 2022; Welsh Government, no date,a). Children will be able to consider topics that are considered crucial to their future, such as sustainability, citizenship, and well-being through taking part in the John Muir Award (John Muir Trust, no date).

NHS Wales (2022) state that a child's experiences and interactions with the world are mostly given and mediated by their parents throughout the first 1000 days. Therefore, what has been described as "an environment in relationships" and is highlighted in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory has an impact on children's development, health, and welfare (Antony, 2022). This includes the child's relationship with key individuals, and the way in which children connect with the environment. Furthermore, in addition to the individual John Muir Award there is also a Family Award that encourages participation as a family unit and is open to participants of all ages and skill levels. The John Muir Trust (no date) explain that the Family Award offers families an opportunity to collaborate towards a goal that is shared, enhancing confidence and fostering parent-child and intergenerational relationships, as well as simply enjoying time spent outside. The John Muir Award can support the opportunity to find and explore a location that can hold a personal connection and sense of belonging. An individual who understands the sense of their existence is one aim of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). Zaatari and Maalouf (2020) state that children's emotional development and academic motivation benefit greatly from a sense of belonging.

However, Spiteri (2020) argues that some parents who do not completely comprehend the benefits of sustainability education may be resistant to participate in such a task. Ginsburg and Audley (2020) add that some teachers in the USA reported that parents were afraid of the potential harm that might occur outdoors, and as a result the children stayed indoors and lacked the experience and endurance needed to play outside. The children were then presented with parental

ambiguity about the risks, and consequently parental worries based on perceived risks, associated with letting them play outside (Olivos-Jara, 2020). According to Wilson (1984), the term 'Biophilia' suggests that humans have a basic, genetically driven tendency and desire to identify with life and lifelike processes. Kahn (1997) explains that there are both advantages and disadvantages to biophilic connections, an advantage would include improving mental health, whereas a disadvantage could include the challenge of connecting with nature in the first place, due to living in urban areas or settings (Jeanine, 2024). On the other hand, Yanez, Fees, and Torquati (2017) add that whilst adults may have many happy memories of playing outside, climbing trees, and tossing rocks into lakes; however, the children of the current generation might not have the same opportunities. Chawla (2009) suggests that children's early interactions with nature influence how these connections to nature are articulated. Moreover, Chawla (1998) emphasised the connection between beneficial environmental behaviour and activities as adults and significant life experiences that connected children to more natural environments.

Conclusion

To conclude, experiences such as the John Muir Award provide opportunities for all individuals to connect or re-connect with nature, as well as exploring and conserving the environment. As well as this, there are prominent examples where the award connects with different curriculums, including the New Curriculum for Wales, as well as the ESD goals. Moreover, the opportunity to share experiences individuals have during the John Muir Award helps promote it further, to get more individuals involved in taking care of the environment around us. Experiences like the John Muir Award can also change the way some practitioners think about sustainability in the early years. Bearing this in mind, it is considered important to think about the potential limitations in incorporating these experiences in the Early Years. For example, the John Muir Award can be seen as too old for some children, as it is recommended for children in Years 4,5 and 6.

Finally, taking part in the John Muir Award as I have said, has allowed me to appreciate the nature around me, and to enjoy the little things I would not have thought of before.

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