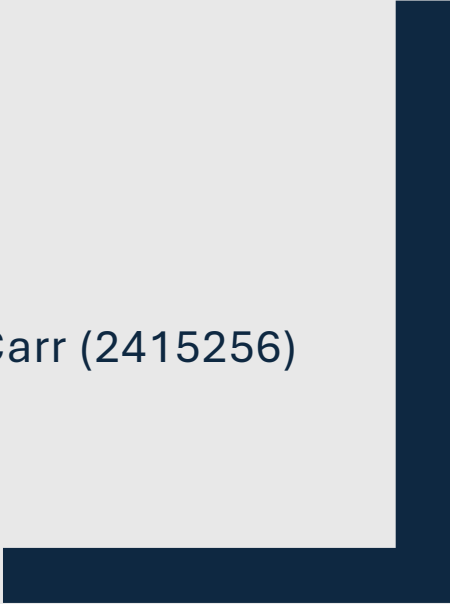




Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the Early Years

EYEC6005

Nicola Carr (2415256)



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AI Statement:

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Script

Part 1 Scrapbook reflection.

Good afternoon, my name is Nicola Carr, student number 2415256. Today's presentation is for *Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the Early Years*, ECEY6005.

For this assignment, I completed a John Muir Award experience during a four-day family visit to Bluestone National Park Resort in Pembrokeshire. This scrapbook is my portfolio of evidence, showing how the experience helped me develop my own understanding of sustainability, nature connection and my role as an Early Years practitioner.

This is where my John Muir journey began. Rather than choosing a traditional nature reserve, I chose Bluestone because it offered something meaningful for my young family. With woodland, lakes, streams, meadows and natural play spaces, it gave Louis and Maisie opportunities to explore freely, take managed risks and connect with nature in a way that felt safe but still adventurous.

When we arrived, I read Bluestone's *Free Range Kids Manifesto*, and I was struck by how closely it reflected John Muir's philosophy. Children are encouraged to climb, investigate, imagine and become immersed in nature, rather than simply being told about it.

One small moment stayed with me. Walking back from the swimming pool, I saw a father teaching his children how to roll down a grassy hill. It reminded me of my own childhood growing up in the countryside, and how simple outdoor experiences can become powerful memories.

As both a parent and practitioner, I made a conscious decision not to direct the children's learning. I wanted to slow down, follow their interests and allow the environment to become the teacher.

Before beginning the practical part, I wanted to understand the person whose philosophy inspired the Award. John Muir was a Scottish-born naturalist, explorer, writer

and conservationist who believed nature should be experienced, respected and protected. His work continues through the John Muir Award, (2026), which encourages people to discover, explore, conserve and share wild places.

One of his well-known quotes is, "In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks." I found this very meaningful because I expected to complete an assignment, but instead I found myself noticing more, slowing down and seeing nature through my children's eyes.

I chose not to overload the scrapbook with theory. Instead, I used it as visual evidence. I will discuss the wider theory, policy and research later in the presentation.

When we arrived, the children were given a Legends Trail quest and lanyard. I have not stuck these into the scrapbook because Louis and Maisie wanted to keep them, but they became an important starting point. They gave the children a purpose: to solve clues, explore the woodland and notice what was around them.

Our first adventure was the Legends Trail towards Black Pool Mill. As adults, it would have been easy to rush from clue to clue, get to the mill and be rewarded with tea and cake! But Louis and Maisie had completely different priorities.

Louis stopped constantly. He noticed tiny daisies beside the path, different leaf shapes, birds near the lake and small details I would usually have walked past. Maisie became fascinated by sticks and searched carefully for the perfect one to become a magic wand.

The trail encouraged us to use our senses, ask questions and observe closely. Every discovery became just as important as finding the next clue. This made me realise that meaningful outdoor learning often happens during the journey, not just at the destination.

As we explored further, ordinary natural objects became extraordinary. Fallen leaves became collections. Twigs became wands. Branches became monster arms. Louis

found a stick covered in leaves and used it to collect even more leaves from the woodland floor.

At one point, he noticed marks on a wooden fence and said, "Look Mummy, I can write my name. It looks like a monster." That moment showed me how naturally children blend imagination, literacy, creativity and exploration when the environment inspires them.

We also discovered fairy houses, woodland sculptures, moss, bark, stones and streams. The children were not separating learning into subjects. They were exploring with their whole bodies, senses and imaginations.

The conserve stage happened in gentle, age-appropriate ways. We fed the ducks using bird food supplied by Bluestone, watched the ducklings with their mothers and talked about being calm and careful around wildlife.

The children also became fascinated by water. They threw stones into a stream to see the splashes and noticed small rafts made from sticks and leaves floating along the water. These were simple moments, but they encouraged care, observation and respect for living things.

After our four-day experience, I wanted to bring everything I had learnt back into my own setting. Our afterschool club is mainly indoors, with no dedicated outdoor area, only a car park and a playing field around ten minutes' walk away. I wanted to show the children that you don't need a forest on your doorstep to begin connecting with nature.

I gave each child their own scrapbook and asked them a simple question: "Where do you find nature?" Their first responses were parks, forests, fields and lakes. What interested me was that they didn't initially realise that nature exists all around us, even in places we pass every day, - like our car park.

So, instead of travelling somewhere special, we became nature detectives and explored our own car park. The children were amazed by what they found—tiny plants growing

through cracks in the tarmac, insects, feathers, seeds, different textures and changing colours. It reminded me that children often need the opportunity to slow down and really observe what is already around them.

Our discussions then moved naturally towards how we could help nature rather than simply observe it.

I provided a large collection of recycled materials and challenged the children to think creatively about how they could reuse everyday objects to support wildlife. Their ideas completely exceeded my expectations.

They transformed milk bottles into bug hotels, filled toilet roll tubes with bamboo sticks to create insect habitats, used upturned flower pots to build fairy houses, turned cardboard boxes into bird houses and created a miniature flower garden using an old box, lolly sticks and colourful cake cases. Rather than seeing rubbish, they began to see possibilities.

Watching the children independently solve problems, share ideas and create something with a real purpose showed me that sustainability becomes far more meaningful when children are actively involved in making a positive difference.

The final stage of the John Muir Award is Share, and this experience inspired me to think beyond my own setting. I wanted to encourage other practitioners, parents and families to see that connecting children with nature doesn't have to be complicated or expensive.

As a result, I wrote a reflective blog on my business website titled "Junk Modelling: Helping Nature One Creation at a Time." Through the blog I shared our project, photographs of the children's creations and practical ideas to inspire others to create opportunities for environmental learning within their own settings and communities.

Looking back over this journey, I realised that I hadn't simply completed an assignment. It changed the way I view nature, the way I support children's learning and the way I

think about sustainability in my own practice. Most importantly, it reminded me that meaningful experiences in nature don't have to happen in extraordinary places—they can begin wherever children are encouraged to stop, notice, care and share.

PART TWO Academic.

Having reflected on my own journey through Discover, Explore, Conserve and Share, I will now critically evaluate how these experiences support Education for Sustainability in the Early Years. Rather than viewing sustainability simply as caring for the environment, contemporary literature defines Education for Sustainability as developing children's relationships with the natural world through participation, child agency, critical thinking, wellbeing and social responsibility (Davis, 2015; Elliott and Davis, 2014). Throughout my John Muir experience, the natural environment provided rich, open-ended learning opportunities without predetermined outcomes. Instead of relying on manufactured resources or adult-led tasks, sticks, leaves, stones, streams and wildlife became the stimulus for curiosity, creativity and enquiry. This reflects research suggesting that authentic engagement with natural environments supports deeper learning because children construct knowledge through direct experience rather than passive instruction (Wilson, 2012; Chawla, 2020).

Froebel regarded nature as children's first classroom, arguing that first-hand experiences enable children to develop knowledge through direct interaction with the world around them (Froebel, 1887/2005). Similarly, the Reggio Emilia approach, developed by Malaguzzi, describes the environment as the 'third teacher', emphasising that learning emerges through the relationship between the child, the adult and the environment rather than through adult instruction alone (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). Vygotsky (1978) complements this perspective by recognising that practitioners remain important in extending children's thinking through sensitive scaffolding rather than directing learning. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that effective pedagogy requires practitioners to facilitate rather than dominate children's experiences, creating

environments in which children actively construct knowledge through exploration, interaction and shared experiences.

My observations supported these theories. Louis and Maisie rarely followed the woodland trail in the way it was intended. Instead, they paused to examine flowers, investigate leaves, collect sticks and observe wildlife. Their learning was driven by curiosity rather than predetermined tasks, illustrating the importance of child agency within authentic learning environments.

These experiences also reflected Nicholson's Theory of Loose Parts, which proposes that creativity increases when children have access to abundant open-ended materials with no fixed purpose (Nicholson, 1971). A single stick became a wand, a leaf collector and later part of a woodland den, demonstrating how natural materials encourage imagination and divergent thinking. However, Nicholson focuses primarily on the environment itself, whereas Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that children's learning is equally shaped by relationships with family, practitioners and the wider community. My observations suggest that both perspectives are important; the woodland created possibilities, but shared family exploration transformed those possibilities into meaningful learning.

Contemporary research supports these findings. Wilson (2012), Chawla (2020) and Davis (2015) all argue that repeated positive experiences in nature strengthen children's environmental awareness, wellbeing and long-term nature connectedness. These principles are reflected within the Curriculum for Wales, which promotes authentic enquiry, curiosity and meaningful engagement with the natural world (Welsh Government, 2022). Nevertheless, access to woodland environments is not universal. Consequently, practitioners should focus less on replicating Forest School and more on providing children with opportunities to investigate natural materials within their own local environments.

My John Muir experience challenged my previous understanding of sustainability. Before undertaking this project, I associated sustainability largely with recycling,

reducing waste and protecting the environment. However, both my observations and the literature suggest that Education for Sustainability is far broader than environmental protection alone. Davis (2015) argues that sustainability should be viewed as a holistic approach that enables children to develop respectful relationships with people, places and the natural world while becoming active citizens capable of shaping a more sustainable future.

Elliott and Davis (2014) similarly argue that young children should not be viewed as future environmental citizens but as citizens of today who are capable of contributing meaningfully to sustainability when provided with authentic opportunities to participate. This was evident within my own practice following the Bluestone experience. Rather than simply teaching children about nature, I created opportunities for them to become active participants through our Eco Explorers project.

Although our afterschool club has no dedicated outdoor environment, the children demonstrated that meaningful environmental learning can still occur when practitioners adopt creative approaches. Initially, when asked where nature could be found, the children identified forests, parks and lakes. However, after exploring our own car park, they began noticing plants growing through cracks in the tarmac, insects, feathers and seeds that they had previously overlooked. This demonstrated that sustainability education begins not with extraordinary environments but with changing how children perceive the ordinary environments around them.

Our discussions naturally progressed towards environmental responsibility. Rather than purchasing new craft materials, the children were challenged to reuse discarded resources to support wildlife. Milk bottles became bug hotels, toilet roll tubes filled with bamboo created insect habitats, cardboard boxes were transformed into bird houses, while old flower pots, lolly sticks and cake cases became fairy gardens and miniature flower displays. This reflects Siraj-Blatchford, Hirst and Smith (2018), who argue that sustainability is most meaningful when children become active participants rather than passive recipients of environmental messages.

Cutter-Mackenzie, Boyd, Moore and Edwards (2014) similarly argue that environmental education should move beyond factual knowledge towards playful, experiential learning that enables children to develop emotional connections with the natural world. Likewise, Hadland (2020) suggests that sustainable practice within early years settings should become embedded within everyday routines rather than being delivered as isolated environmental topics. My own experience strongly supports this perspective because the children's enthusiasm developed through meaningful participation rather than direct teaching.

These principles are strongly reflected within Welsh and international policy. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 recognises that decisions made today should safeguard the wellbeing of future generations, reinforcing the importance of embedding sustainable values from early childhood (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2026). This aligns with the Curriculum for Wales, which aims to develop ethical, informed citizens who understand their responsibilities towards society, the environment and future generations (Welsh Government, 2022). Similarly, the Play Sufficiency Duty (Welsh Government, 2025) recognises children's right to quality play opportunities, while Articles 12 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasise children's rights to participate in decisions affecting them and to receive an education that develops respect for the natural environment (United Nations, 1989). Collectively, these policies position Education for Sustainability not as an additional area of learning but as a fundamental responsibility of Early Years practice.

Importantly, Education for Sustainability is not solely about protecting the environment today; it is about developing children's capacity to become informed, responsible and environmentally literate citizens for the future. Chawla (2020) argues that positive experiences in nature during childhood are among the strongest predictors of environmental stewardship in adulthood. Similarly, Wilson (2012) suggests that children are more likely to care for nature when they first develop an emotional connection with it through regular, meaningful outdoor experiences rather than through factual teaching alone.

This represents a significant shift from previous generations. For many adults, nature was simply part of everyday childhood and often taken for granted. However, increasing urbanisation, reduced access to natural spaces and changing patterns of play mean that many children now experience significantly fewer opportunities to develop these early connections with the natural world (Natural England, 2026; Chawla, 2020). Consequently, early years practitioners now have an increasingly important role in creating opportunities for children to experience, value and care for nature.

Elliott, McCrea, Newsome and Gaul (2020) argue that Education for Sustainability should empower children to become active participants in creating more sustainable futures rather than passive recipients of environmental knowledge. This aligns closely with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which places a responsibility on Wales to improve the social, environmental, cultural and economic wellbeing of future generations (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2026). Similarly, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals highlight education as a key mechanism for achieving sustainable development worldwide (United Nations, 2015).

Therefore, introducing children to nature from an early age is not simply about encouraging outdoor play; it is about fostering curiosity, environmental responsibility and a lifelong commitment to protecting the natural world for future generations.

Overall, this evaluation demonstrates that Education for Sustainability extends beyond environmental awareness or isolated conservation activities. Instead, it requires pedagogical approaches that promote child agency, meaningful relationships with nature and authentic participation in sustainable practices (Davis, 2015; Elliott and Davis, 2014). Although access to natural environments differs between settings, meaningful Education for Sustainability is not dependent upon extensive woodland or specialist resources. Rather, it depends upon practitioners creating opportunities for children to explore, question, participate and develop positive relationships with the natural world (Hadland, 2020; Siraj-Blatchford, Hirst and Smith, 2018).

Ultimately, protecting nature begins by connecting children with nature. Research suggests that children who develop positive relationships with the natural environment during early childhood are more likely to become environmentally responsible adults and active advocates for sustainability in later life (Wilson, 2012; Chawla, 2020). Consequently, Early Years practitioners play a significant role not only in supporting children's current learning but also in shaping the environmental values and behaviours of future generations (Davis, 2015).

I would like to finish with John Muir's words:

"In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks."

This journey has reinforced my belief that meaningful experiences in nature are not an optional addition to early childhood education but an essential foundation for developing curious, capable and environmentally responsible citizens.

Link to Blog

<https://www.thecraftyclubandparties.co.uk/post/junk-modelling-helping-nature-one-creation-at-a-time>

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