

Jack Benney

Student Number: 2104744

Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the early years

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PART 2

Personal reflection

Hi, my name is Jack Benney.

The aim of my presentation is to inform others about the John Muir Award while discussing my personal experiences and findings.

The site I chose was Loughor, more specifically Loughor Estuary and the housing estate where I live. I chose these places because they hold many fond memories from my childhood. I used to play football on the green with my cousins and friends, and I still regularly walk my dog along the estuary where she loves going into the water. Loughor is also well known for its history of cockle harvesting and is a peaceful area that has remained relatively unspoilt. Although I pass these places almost every day, completing this award encouraged me to slow down and appreciate the smaller details that I would normally overlook in my busy working life.

The John Muir Award is an environmental education programme created by the John Muir Trust. It encourages people to connect with nature through four stages: Discover, Explore, Conserve and Share. The award is named after the Scottish born naturalist and conservationist John Muir, whose work helped protect areas such as Yosemite National Park. One of my favourite quotes from him is, *"Into the woods I go, to lose my mind and find my soul."* I chose to complete this award because I believe outdoor learning plays an important role in children's learning, wellbeing and development, while also encouraging respect for the environment.

For the Discover stage, I explored the Loughor area in much greater detail than I ever had before. I photographed the Loughor Monument, the estuary and a variety of local plants.

One thing that really surprised me was discovering that the Loughor Monument has stood there for 99 years, something I had never known despite walking past it many times. Looking more closely at the estuary and surrounding wildlife helped me appreciate that even familiar places can contain important ecosystems and local history. It made me realise that meaningful experiences with nature do not always require travelling somewhere new. Sometimes the most valuable discoveries are right on our doorstep.

During the Explore stage, I looked more closely at how the area functions. I considered safety, particularly the uneven ground, muddy areas and changing tides around the estuary. I also identified wildlife living within the area, including bees, birds and woodlice, as well as different bushes and flowers such as blackberry, laurel, spiraea, berberis, buttercups, cow parsley and St John's Wort. Before completing this project, I never realised how many different species existed so close to home.

Exploring also made me think about how important these plants are because they provide habitats and food for insects and other wildlife. It made me reflect on how much green space is gradually being replaced by new housing estates, shops and schools within my community. I realised that if we are not careful, future generations may not grow up with the same outdoor memories that I was lucky enough to have.

While exploring, I also noticed litter around the area. Although the environment was generally well looked after, even small amounts of rubbish can pose serious risks to wildlife. This naturally led into the Conserve stage of my award.

To help protect the area, I carried out litter picking around the estuary to reduce the dangers posed to animals. I also made a bird feeder with my family to provide additional food for birds, especially during the winter months when natural food sources become limited.

Another activity I completed was planting tomatoes and chives at home. This encouraged me to think more about sustainability and reducing plastic packaging by growing some of our own food. Although these are only small actions, they demonstrated that conservation

does not always require large projects. Small changes made by lots of people can have a meaningful impact.

For the Share stage, I created an online scrapbook called *Loughor Paradise*, which documented my journey through each stage of the award. I wanted my scrapbook to appeal to children, so I also created a poem and a simple song about the estuary and its wildlife. I hope these creative activities help younger children learn about their local environment in an enjoyable and memorable way.

I also wanted to encourage those around me to get involved. I took my brother litter picking with me around the estuary and spent time outdoors with my little cousin Rosie making daisy chains from flowers we found. Although these seem like simple activities, they opened important conversations about caring for nature and showed that creativity does not always require technology or expensive resources.

Alongside sharing my own experiences, I also highlighted wider environmental issues affecting the estuary. A Wales Online article written by Richard Youle discussed pollution concerns caused partly by domestic sewage, reinforcing the importance of protecting this Marine Special Area of Conservation for future generations.

Living so close to the Loughor Estuary has made me realise how fortunate I am to have such an important natural environment on my doorstep. It provides opportunities for exercise, relaxation and improving mental wellbeing while also supporting a wide variety of wildlife. Spending time there has helped me appreciate the value of protecting local green spaces for both people and nature.

Reflecting on this experience using Vygotsky's theory of learning helped me understand how my own thinking has developed throughout this project. My understanding of outdoor learning has grown through research, discussion and reflection. Vygotsky believed that learning develops through social interaction, and this became clear while completing the award. Whether litter picking with my brother, making daisy chains with Rosie or discussing my findings with others, these shared experiences helped deepen my understanding. It also highlighted the importance of adults supporting children's learning through questioning,

discussion and shared exploration, allowing them to become more confident and environmentally aware.

One thing this project has made me want to learn more about is the wildlife that lives around the Loughor Estuary throughout the different seasons. During this project I only observed a small number of species, but it made me realise there is far more to discover about the plants, insects and birds that rely on this habitat. I would also like to understand more about the long-term effects of pollution and climate change on the estuary and what local communities can continue to do to protect it. Before completing this award, I simply saw Loughor as somewhere I visited regularly. Now I see it as an important ecosystem that deserves to be appreciated and protected. It has also reinforced my belief that children should have opportunities to connect with nature from an early age. Those experiences create lifelong memories, inspire creativity and encourage children to value and care for the world around them, just as they did for me growing up.

Overall, completing the John Muir Award has strengthened my appreciation of nature and reinforced how valuable outdoor learning is within early childhood education. More importantly, it reminded me that protecting nature starts with simple actions. I truly believe that together we can all make a difference by making small changes, encouraging others to get involved and starting important conversations about caring for our environment.

Critical Analysis

Now that I have reflected on my own experience of completing the John Muir Award, I would like to critically evaluate how experiences such as these can support the philosophy and principles of Early Childhood Education for Sustainability, often referred to as ECES.

Early Childhood Education for Sustainability goes beyond teaching children about recycling or caring for plants, states Early Years Talent (2026). It aims to help children develop the knowledge, skills and values needed to make positive choices for themselves, other people and the environment, both now and in the future. Sustainability is often viewed through environmental, social and economic perspectives, meaning children are encouraged not

only to care for nature but also to understand fairness, community and responsible decision making. My experience completing the John Muir Award demonstrated that even simple outdoor activities can begin developing these values from an early age.

One of the educational theorists whose philosophy closely reflects my experience is Friedrich Froebel. Early Excellence (2026) states that Froebel believed that nature should play a central role in children's education and described it as one of the child's greatest teachers. He argued that children learn most effectively through first hand experiences rather than simply listening to adults or reading from books. Instead, children should be encouraged to observe, investigate and explore the world around them.

Throughout my John Muir Award, I found myself learning in exactly this way. Rather than researching wildlife online, I visited the Loughor Estuary, identified different flowers and bushes, observed bees and birds, and began to understand how each species contributes to the local ecosystem. Before completing the award, I had walked through this area many times without paying much attention to my surroundings. Taking time to explore helped me appreciate the importance of habitats that I had previously overlooked. This supports Froebel's belief that meaningful learning happens when children actively engage with the natural world rather than simply being told about it.

Early Excellence (2026) continues to explain that Froebel also believed that children develop respect for nature when they are given opportunities to care for living things. This links directly to my own conservation activities, including litter picking, making a bird feeder and growing tomatoes and chives at home. These experiences encouraged me to think about responsibility and showed that small actions can make a positive contribution towards protecting the environment. Within an early year setting, similar activities could help children develop empathy, responsibility and an understanding that their actions can have an impact on the world around them.

However, although Froebel's ideas remain influential today, they were developed during the nineteenth century. National Library of medicine (2025) states that modern sustainability education now considers issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, challenges that were not widely recognised during Froebel's lifetime. While his philosophy

provides an excellent foundation for outdoor learning, practitioners must also introduce children to contemporary environmental issues in ways that are appropriate for their age and understanding.

Another educational theorist whose work closely relates to my experience is John Dewey. According to Education Hub (2021) Dewey believed that education should be based on real life experiences and that children learn best by actively participating in meaningful activities. His philosophy of learning by doing suggests that children develop deeper understanding when they solve real problems rather than simply memorising information.

This became particularly clear during the Conserve stage of my John Muir Award. Rather than simply discussing pollution, I actively removed litter from the estuary. This practical experience helped me understand why conservation matters and demonstrated how individual actions can positively influence the environment. Similarly, creating my online scrapbook, sharing my experience with my family and encouraging my younger cousin and brother to take part transformed my learning into something that could benefit others within my community.

Dewey also believed that education should prepare children to become active members of society. This links closely to the Jordan (2026) explanation of the Early Childhood Education for Sustainability because sustainability is not only about protecting wildlife but also about encouraging children to become responsible citizens who understand that they can make positive contributions within their communities. Activities such as community litter picks, school gardening projects and exploring local environments all allow children to develop this sense of responsibility while learning through meaningful experiences.

Despite these strengths, Dewey's approach is not without limitations as stated by Campbell (2026). Practical activities alone do not automatically lead to deeper understanding. For example, children may enjoy litter picking without fully understanding why pollution affects wildlife unless adults encourage discussion and reflection. This highlights the important role of practitioners in extending children's thinking through careful questioning and conversation. Without this support, outdoor activities risk becoming enjoyable experiences rather than meaningful learning opportunities.

Reflecting on both Froebel and Dewey has helped me recognise that my John Muir Award experience was about far more than simply spending time outdoors. It demonstrated how carefully planned experiences in nature can encourage curiosity, responsibility, problem solving and environmental awareness. These are all qualities that lie at the heart of Early Childhood Education for Sustainability and provide children with valuable foundations for becoming informed and responsible members of society.

Building on the ideas of Froebel and Dewey, another educational theorist whose philosophy closely links with my experience is Rudolf Steiner. Mikhael (2026) explains that Steiner believed that children develop best when they are given opportunities to experience the natural world through creativity, imagination and meaningful first-hand experiences. He argued that young children should spend regular time outdoors where they can develop a sense of wonder and curiosity without relying heavily on technology or structured teaching.

Throughout my John Muir Award, I found myself experiencing many of these principles. One of the most memorable moments was spending time with my little cousin Rosie making daisy chains from flowers we had found. Although this was a simple activity, it demonstrated how nature can inspire creativity without expensive resources or digital technology. Similarly, creating my poem and song about the Loughor Estuary encouraged me to express my appreciation of nature in creative ways. These experiences reinforced Steiner's belief that children often learn best when they are free to use their imagination and engage with the natural environment.

However, Steiner's philosophy can also be criticised. BBC News (2014) explains that while reducing children's dependence on technology has many benefits, technology itself is not necessarily harmful. Used appropriately, digital tools can help children explore wildlife, identify plants and share environmental messages with wider communities. My own online scrapbook is an example of this. Although my learning began outdoors, technology allowed me to document my experiences and encourage others to appreciate the local environment. This suggests that sustainability education should not reject technology completely but instead teach children how to use it responsibly.

Another theorist that strongly connects with my experience is Lev Vygotsky. McLeod (2025) explains that Vygotsky believed that learning develops through social interaction and that children gain a deeper understanding when supported by others. His ideas surrounding the Zone of Proximal Development and the More Knowledgeable Other suggest that adults and peers play an important role in extending children's learning through discussion, encouragement and shared experiences.

Looking back at my John Muir Award, I can clearly see these principles. Completing the activities alongside members of my family, taking my brother litter picking and making daisy chains with Rosie all became opportunities for learning through conversation and shared experiences. Rather than completing the activities in isolation, discussing what we had discovered helped deepen my own understanding of environmental responsibility. Within early years settings, practitioners can support children's learning in a similar way by asking open questions, introducing new vocabulary and encouraging children to reflect on what they have observed.

Although Vygotsky's theory strongly supports outdoor learning, it also reminds us that simply taking children outside is not enough. Without effective adult support, outdoor experiences can become enjoyable activities without promoting deeper learning. Practitioners therefore have an important responsibility to scaffold children's understanding so that experiences within nature develop both knowledge and critical thinking.

The importance of sustainability within education is also recognised through a range of national and international policies. One of the most significant is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. These seventeen global goals aim to create a fairer and more sustainable future by addressing issues such as poverty, health, education, climate change and protecting life on land, as stated by United Nations (2026)

Several of these goals directly connect with my John Muir Award experience. Goal 4, Quality Education, encourages children to develop the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. Goal 13, Climate Action, highlights the importance of protecting the environment, while Goal 15, Life on Land, focuses on conserving ecosystems and biodiversity. Through exploring the Loughor Estuary, protecting wildlife through litter

picking and encouraging others to appreciate local nature, I was able to engage with these aims on a local level.

In Wales, sustainability is also embedded within the Curriculum for Wales, according to Jones (2021). One of the four purposes is to develop ethical, informed citizens who understand the impact their decisions have on the world around them. Completing the John Muir Award encouraged exactly this type of thinking by helping me recognise that even simple actions, such as removing litter or planting vegetables, can positively contribute to the local environment. These experiences are valuable because they encourage children to see themselves as active participants in creating a more sustainable future rather than passive observers.

Another important Welsh policy is the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, as stated by Wales Government (2026). This legislation encourages organisations to consider the long-term impact of their decisions while working towards goals such as creating a healthier, more resilient and globally responsible Wales. Reflecting on my own experience, I realised that conservation is not simply about improving the environment today. It is also about protecting natural spaces so that future generations can enjoy the same opportunities that I experienced growing up. This became particularly meaningful when I reflected on how increasing development within my local community could reduce opportunities for children to connect with nature in the future.

Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship, often referred to as ESDGC, provides another important perspective. Llangynidr (N.D) states that unlike approaches that focus mainly on environmental conservation, ESDGC encourages children to consider wider issues including equality, diversity, social justice, human rights and global responsibility alongside caring for the environment. This broader understanding reminds practitioners that sustainability is about people as well as nature.

Reflecting critically, I believe this is one area where the John Muir Award could be strengthened. Throughout my experience, the award placed considerable emphasis on exploring nature and protecting local environments, which are undoubtedly valuable experiences. However, there was much less focus on wider citizenship issues such as social

inequality, cultural diversity or global responsibility. While participants develop a stronger appreciation for nature, they may not fully explore how environmental issues connect with society, economics and communities around the world. For this reason, I believe the John Muir Award works most effectively when it is combined with wider sustainability education within early childhood settings, allowing children to develop a more balanced understanding of sustainability in all its forms.

Although my experience completing the John Muir Award was extremely positive, it is important to critically evaluate whether experiences such as these fully support the philosophy of Early Childhood Education for Sustainability or whether there are limitations that practitioners should consider.

One of the greatest strengths of the John Muir Award is that it encourages children and adults to develop a meaningful relationship with nature through first hand experiences rather than simply learning about the environment in a classroom. During my own experience, I developed a much greater appreciation for my local area simply by slowing down and observing what was around me. I discovered wildlife, learnt the names of plants I had previously ignored and began to recognise how small actions can contribute towards protecting local habitats. Research consistently suggests that children who spend regular time outdoors are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards the environment, improved emotional wellbeing and stronger problem-solving skills. These findings support my own experience, as I found myself becoming more aware of both the beauty and the fragility of the natural environment.

The award also supports children's physical, emotional and social development. Activities such as exploring local environments, working together during conservation projects and sharing experiences with others encourage communication, teamwork and confidence. My own experiences of litter picking with my brother and making daisy chains with my cousin Rosie demonstrated that sustainability could strengthen relationships while creating meaningful memories. This reflects the wider aims of Early Childhood Education for Sustainability, which recognises that children's wellbeing is closely connected with the wellbeing of the environment.

However, despite these strengths, the John Muir Award is not without limitations. John Muir Award (2009) states that one criticism is that it places its strongest emphasis on environmental sustainability while giving much less attention to the wider social and economic dimensions of sustainability. Although participants are encouraged to care for wildlife and natural spaces, there is relatively little focus on issues such as poverty, equality, cultural diversity or social justice. These are all important aspects of sustainable development recognised by UNESCO and the United Nations. If practitioners rely solely on the John Muir Award, children may develop an excellent understanding of environmental conservation without fully appreciating the wider concept of global citizenship.

This suggests that the award should be viewed as one part of a broader sustainability curriculum rather than a complete model for Early Childhood Education for Sustainability. Practitioners should extend children's understanding by introducing discussions about fairness, inclusion, responsible consumption and the ways environmental issues affect communities across the world. By combining the John Muir Award with wider sustainability education, children are more likely to develop a balanced understanding of their responsibilities as both environmental stewards and global citizens.

There are also practical challenges that early year's practitioners may encounter when implementing outdoor learning experiences. Weather conditions within the United Kingdom can often limit opportunities to spend extended periods outdoors, while some settings may have limited access to natural environments. Urban schools and nurseries may not have woodlands, rivers or estuaries nearby, meaning practitioners need to think creatively about how nature can be incorporated into everyday learning. My own experience was made easier because I live close to the Loughor Estuary, something that not every child is fortunate enough to experience.

Health and safety is another consideration. Outdoor learning requires careful risk assessments to ensure children remain safe while still being allowed to explore freely. Uneven ground, water, changing weather conditions and wildlife all require practitioners to balance opportunities for exploration with appropriate supervision. However, many researchers argue that children benefit from managed risk because it helps develop

resilience, confidence and decision-making skills. This suggests that risk should not be avoided altogether but managed carefully to maximise learning opportunities.

Another challenge is practitioner confidence. Not all early year's practitioners feel confident identifying wildlife or delivering sustainability education. Without appropriate training, outdoor activities may become simple walks or play sessions rather than meaningful learning experiences. My own understanding developed considerably while completing this award, demonstrating that practitioners themselves also benefit from opportunities to explore and learn about the natural world. Ongoing professional development is therefore essential if sustainability education is to be delivered effectively, this is all given by John Muir Award (2009).

Reflecting on my own experience, one of the biggest changes was the way I now view my local environment. Before beginning the John Muir Award, I saw the estuary as somewhere to walk my dog or spend time outdoors. I now recognise it as an important ecosystem that supports wildlife, benefits the local community and deserves protection. It also made me reflect on my childhood and how fortunate I was to grow up playing outside with friends and family. As green spaces continue to disappear through development, there is a risk that future generations may have fewer opportunities to build those same connections with nature. This has strengthened my belief that early year's practitioners have an important role in ensuring children continue to experience the natural world.

Overall, completing the John Muir Award has demonstrated that meaningful outdoor experiences strongly support the philosophy of Early Childhood Education for Sustainability. My experiences reflected many of the ideas presented by Froebel, Dewey, Steiner and Vygotsky, while also supporting the principles within the Curriculum for Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. However, critically evaluating the award has shown that it should not be viewed as a complete approach to sustainability education. Although it provides an excellent foundation for developing environmental awareness and appreciation of nature, practitioners should also ensure that children explore wider issues such as equality, diversity, social responsibility and global citizenship.

To conclude, the John Muir Award has changed the way I view both nature and my future role as an early year's practitioner. It has reinforced my belief that children learn best through meaningful experiences, positive relationships and opportunities to explore the world around them. Most importantly, it has reminded me that sustainability begins with small actions. Whether that is planting a flower, picking up litter or simply encouraging a child to stop and notice a bee on a flower, these moments can inspire a lifelong appreciation for nature and help create a more sustainable future for generations to come.

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