

Part 1: Reflection Upon Experiences of the John Muir Award

Good afternoon. In this pre-recorded video, I will reflect on my experiences while completing the John Muir Award and will critically evaluate how these experiences have supported the philosophy and principles of sustainability in early childhood education.

To begin my reflection, I would like to outline the process I followed while exploring ideas for this experience. I chose to complete the John Muir Award by engaging with nature in my own back garden—a space I hoped to bring to life with character and joy for both me and my family. From this initial idea, I was inspired to support local wildlife, insects, and birds. To achieve this, I designed and created birdhouses tailored to the needs of the different species that visited my garden. Before doing so, I began observing the birds that frequently visited the space—watching how they searched for nesting habitats, food sources, and safe places to raise their young. I discovered that different species require different entrance hole sizes (depending on the bird's size) and prefer different locations within the garden. Through these observations, I quickly realised that smaller birds favoured shaded, quiet areas, while larger species were more comfortable in open, elevated spots. This knowledge helped me create birdhouses that were appropriately sized, painted in colours that attract birds, and placed in ideal locations for each species. As a full-time early year's practitioner and university student—while also navigating the wider challenges of everyday life—I had not previously accomplished some of the things I had hoped to in my home and outdoor space. However, completing the John Muir Award encouraged me to spend more time outdoors, develop my garden, and reconnect with the joy I once found in nature and wildlife as a child.

The John Muir Award has come to symbolise a sense of achievement, representing a personal journey of reconnection and purpose. As someone who balances the demands of everyday life, I often found it difficult to make time for myself. However, this experience reminded me of the importance of personal time—even something as simple as reconnecting with nature, listening to birdsong, and watching butterflies flutter in the breeze, while being in my own space. Simple activities such as planting crops, designing birdhouses, and observing wildlife explore the garden I created has brought me genuine happiness. The award has positively impacted my mental well-being, as I now experience a sense of calm and joy whenever I am in my happy place, my back garden!

Throughout this experience, I developed a deeper understanding of what sustainability truly entails. By actively engaging with my garden by planting crops, supporting insects, and creating safe habitats, I witnessed how small, individual actions can positively influence one singular environment. These actions reflect key principles of sustainability, emphasising the importance of caring for the natural world to support ecosystems for future generations. Designing birdhouses, planting a range of plants and seeds, and installing feeders demonstrated my awareness of ecological interdependence; I observed how birds, bees, and butterflies rely on such spaces to survive and flourish—which was the original and only goal I had hoped to achieve by the end of this module, and throughout my new experiences.

As an early year's practitioner, this experience enabled me to model care, curiosity, and respect for living things—core values I strive to embed in the children I work with as I promote sustainability from the earliest stages of

development. To support this, I plan to create a nature area for wildlife within my early years setting, involving the children throughout its development. I aim to nurture these values through hands-on experiences, helping children understand interdependence and the role every creature plays in the world around them. For example, bees are pollinators—they transfer pollen between flowers, which helps plants reproduce and enables bees to collect nectar to make honey, therefore, to promote this we will install flowers within the area!

One of the most rewarding aspects of this experience was creating and designing a birdhouse with the children in my early years setting. The activity was a great success—the children were eager to learn about wildlife and birds and showed great excitement as they explored the nursery's outdoor area in search of insects and animals they could support. This hands-on experience aligns closely with sustainability in early childhood education, which emphasises fostering environmental awareness, empathy, and responsibility from a young age. By engaging children in nature-based projects, such as building habitats and observing wildlife, I can support their understanding of ecological interdependence and the importance of caring for the planet.

Next time, I plan to create additional birdhouses and bird feeders with the children, displaying them around the setting to offer further opportunities for connecting with nature. These experiences allow children to witness the joy of wildlife thriving because of their efforts. It was truly special to observe each child's sense of achievement as they realised, they were actively helping birds and other creatures survive.

As this module comes to an end, I feel inspired to continue nurturing my garden as a nature-friendly space, feeding birds with nutritious food and ensuring they have a safe place to rest. Through this experience, I've come to see myself not

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as separate from nature, but as an active participant in its care and protection.

This perspective aligns with posthumanism thinking, which challenges notions of human dominance and instead emphasises our interconnectedness with the more-than-human world. By creating habitats for birds, supporting insects, and growing nutritious food for both people and wildlife, I recognised that my actions were not solely for human benefit, but part of a shared ecosystem in which all beings matter.

As an early year's practitioner, I feel confident in my role to influence children to become collaborators with nature—listening to birdsong, searching for insects, and recognising that their actions have a real impact on the lives of other species. This approach supports posthumanism pedagogy, which fosters empathy, responsibility, and a deeper awareness of the living world we all inhabit by challenging traditional notions of human-centred learning.

I have learnt that connecting with nature not only supports sustainability but also nurtures my own wellbeing and professional growth. Completing the John Muir Award showed me how small, thoughtful actions, like planting crops, building birdhouses, and exploring outdoors with children—can make a real impact. It's reminded me that I am not separate from nature, but part of a shared ecosystem where every being matters. Moving forward, this experience will guide my practice as an early year's practitioner. I feel confident in supporting young children to become curious, caring individuals with the natural world—fostering values of empathy, responsibility, and respect that will shape their future and ours!

Part 2: Critically Evaluating how these Experiences have Supported the Philosophy and Principles of Sustainability in Early Childhood Education

To begin my critical evaluation, I would like to begin by saying, the John Muir Award can be meaningfully embedded within early years practice in Wales by aligning its core principles—Discover, Explore, Conserve, Share—with the Curriculum for Wales, which places holistic, experiential, and sustainable learning at the heart of its goals. The award supports the development of the four purposes of the curriculum, enabling children to become “ambitious, capable learners, enterprising, creative contributors, ethical, informed citizens and healthy, confident individuals” (Welsh Government, 2020). Nature-based exploration and conservation activities—such as designing birdhouses, observing wildlife, and planting crops—allow children to engage in real-world learning that fosters curiosity, resilience, and ecological awareness. The award also complements Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship, a cross-cutting theme in Welsh education, by encouraging learners to take responsibility for their environment and understand their individual roles in a global context (DCELLS, 2008; Glover, 2023). According to the John Muir Trust (2022a), the award contributes directly to the Curriculum for Wales by promoting outdoor learning and inclusive practice, particularly through its accessibility and adaptability to diverse learner needs.

Within the context of the John Muir Award, hands-on activities such as planting crops and building birdhouses offer rich opportunities for experiential learning and are highly compatible with both the award’s framework and early years educational theory. These practices enable children to observe wildlife, investigate ecosystems, and actively support biodiversity (John Muir Trust,

2022b). Such environmental engagement reflects Dewey's (1938) philosophy of experiential learning, in which knowledge is constructed through direct interaction with the world. Dewey's approach champions environments where children explore, question, and construct understanding through play and inquiry. Activities like planting and constructing exemplify his principle of "learning by doing," fostering physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Similarly, Froebel's emphasis on nature as an essential educational tool is evident in outdoor practices that promotes care, curiosity, and connection to living things (Froebel Trust, 2022)

According to the United Nations (2015), building birdhouses and planting crops in early years practice aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), offering children meaningful ways to engage with global sustainability through hands-on learning. For example, SDG 2: Zero Hunger encourages sustainable farming—children who plant crops gain awareness of food systems, nutrition, and environmental cycles. These activities also support SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Outdoor engagement promotes physical health, emotional regulation, and mental wellbeing; it fosters problem-solving, biodiversity protection, and climate literacy in developmentally appropriate ways (NCFE, 2022a; Montessori Europe, 2022; Flourish Project, 2023).

Sustainability and outdoor learning are vital components of early years practice, particularly within the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings in Wales. The curriculum emphasises the importance of creating authentic, purposeful learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate and rooted in children's natural curiosity and connection to their environment. Outdoor

learning supports the curriculum's five developmental pathways by offering children opportunities to explore, take risks and build relationships with the natural world (Welsh Government, 2022a). Activities like planting crops and building birdhouses not only foster ecological awareness but also promote holistic development, including social collaboration and physical coordination. The curriculum also encourages practitioners to make the best use of their setting's environment and resources, recognising that outdoor spaces can inspire awe, wonder and creativity. This also aligns with the broader goals of the Curriculum for Wales, which aims to develop a child's ethical, informed citizens and healthy, confident individuals through experiential, play-based learning (Tinney, 2023).

The role of the practitioner is crucial in embedding sustainability within early years education, as they act both as educators and role models—shaping children's values, habits, and understanding of the world from the very beginning of their learning journey. According to Colwey (2025), practitioners who model sustainable behaviours such as conserving water, reducing waste, and caring for wildlife help children internalise environmentally responsible actions. Through thoughtfully planned activities, such as gardening, wildlife observation, and nature-based play, practitioners make sustainability relevant to children's lives (NCFE, 2022b). They also ensure that such learning is integrated across key curriculum frameworks, including the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings, which encourages use of the environment and outdoor resources to inspire awe, curiosity, and purposeful learning (Welsh Government, 2022b). By understanding and actively promoting sustainability, practitioners support holistic development and nurture a generation of ethical, informed citizens equipped to care for the world they live in.

The philosophy of sustainability in early childhood education presents both exciting opportunities for children and notable challenges, particularly within the context of the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings in Wales. One key challenge is the lack of clarity—practitioners often find it difficult to embed sustainability consistently across settings (Weldemariam *et al.*, 2017). Practitioners may also feel underprepared or lack the confidence to deliver sustainability education, especially in the absence of targeted training (Collins and Garrity, 2023). Despite these challenges, the Welsh curriculum provides a strong foundation for progress by promoting outdoor learning and child-led exploration. Practitioners are encouraged to make use of their setting's environment to inspire awe, curiosity, and meaningful engagement with nature. However, as highlighted, access to training and the development of practitioner confidence are essential to help children meaningfully connect with the world around them.

In conclusion, embedding sustainability within an early year's practice provides an ethical imperative, especially within the framework of the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings in Wales. Through hands-on, outdoor experiences such as planting crops and building birdhouses, children can engage with the natural world in ways that nurture curiosity, responsibility and holistic development. Practitioners play a crucial role in modelling suitable behaviours and creating meaningful learning opportunities that integrate with the curriculum's development pathways of the Curriculum for Wales. By fostering ecological awareness from the very beginning of a child's learning journey, practitioners lay the groundwork for a more sustainable and compassionate future.

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