

Jordan MacDonald

Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the Early Years portfolio

I acknowledge the use of the identification app “picture this” to help me identify plant species to support me in completing my physical scrapbook.

I acknowledge the use of Grammarly from the period of starting my work until submission on 11 July 2026. I accepted some of the suggestions provided to improve the grammatical accuracy of my work.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI-generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Portfolio contents

Component 1 – John Muir Award Physical scrapbook (seen by Paul Darby during lecture)

Component 2 - Reflection and Academic Presentation Scripts (Video shared on one drive and via email)

Component 3 – Academic Reference list

Component 2 - Reflection Script

Prynhawn da, my name is Jordan Macdonald, student number 2411206, and today I would like to share my reflection on completing the John Muir Award. When I first found out that I would be completing the John Muir Award, I felt quite apprehensive. I had never even heard of John Muir or the Award before, and after looking through the guidance, it seemed like it required a lot of creativity. Although I do have a creative side, I was worried about finding the time to complete the module alongside balancing work and being a mum to two young children. I didn't waste any time getting started and spent the first few days researching John Muir and learning more about the Award to understand what was involved. I soon realised the guidance was flexible and that every award would be unique to the individual. Knowing I could interpret the guidance in a way that was meaningful to me made me feel much more confident and excited to get started.

There were many wild spaces around Swansea that I considered choosing, but I ultimately decided on Cadle Heath, a place that has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. For my first visit, I chose to go alone so I could really take my time reconnecting with the area without any distractions. Returning to Cadle Heath brought back so many happy childhood memories. I remembered building dens with my friends, running through the grassy paths and spending hours outdoors without a care in the world. As I grew older, my relationship with the heath grew with me. During my teenage years, it became somewhere I could escape the pressures of everyday life, clear my head and enjoy some peace and quiet. It dawned on me that most of my memories of the heath were made before the days of smartphones and social media. I didn't realise it at the time, but how lucky I was to grow up running wild and free through this natural space, feeling safe and disconnected from the modern world.

Returning as an adult felt very different. The memories were still there, but this time I was seeing the heath through new eyes. Instead of simply enjoying the walk, I found myself paying closer attention to the plants, trees and wildlife around me. I hadn't realised just how many different species of plants grew there or the important role they play in supporting biodiversity. Before completing this Award, I think I would have walked past many of these plants without giving them a second thought, perhaps even seeing them as just overgrown weeds. Now I understand that every plant has a purpose and contributes to the wider ecosystem.

During my exploration, I also noticed that the entrances closest to my childhood home did not have any bins, and these areas had the most litter. I found this really disappointing because such a beautiful place deserves to be respected and cared for. I began thinking about ways the area could be improved so I decided to contact Swansea Council and suggested installing additional bins or placing signs at the entrances, encouraging visitors to take their rubbish home. From this, I now know that conservation doesn't always involve large projects. Sometimes, small ideas can make a positive difference.

As I started creating my scrapbook, my children became interested in what I was doing. They asked questions about the John Muir Award and about Cadle Heath. They were keen to get involved, so I invited them to join me on my second visit,

where we spent time litter picking together as a family. This was one of my favourite moments of the whole experience. It felt like everything had come full circle. I was able to take my own children to a place that had meant so much to me growing up, while sharing stories from my childhood and creating new memories together. At the same time, we were doing something positive for the environment. It reminded me how easily children connect with nature when they are given the opportunity. Their enthusiasm and curiosity reinforced the importance of encouraging children to spend time outdoors, not only to enjoy nature but also to learn to value and care for it.

One of my favourite parts of the Award was identifying different plants and trees. I was genuinely curious about what they were. I am now enjoying trying to identify what I see and remember their names. I have since spent time in my own garden looking at what is growing and seeing whether any of the plants are the same as those, I found at the heath. I realised that I had started looking at nature differently, becoming much more observant and appreciative of the environment around me.

Before completing this Award, I thought I already appreciated nature because I enjoyed spending time outdoors. Looking back, I now realise there is a difference between simply being in nature and truly connecting with it. I find myself observing more carefully and appreciating the important role that even the smallest plants and habitats play in supporting wildlife. This experience has also encouraged me to slow down. Life is often busy, and I spend so much time rushing from one task to the next that I rarely stop to notice what's around me. Spending time at the heath gave me a sense of calm and reminded me that nature provides space for peace and reflection.

I could never have imagined that someone I knew nothing about would have such an influence on the way I see the natural world today. John Muir's belief that people should value, enjoy and protect nature continues to inspire others long after his lifetime, and I think that's a wonderful legacy to leave behind. I hope that, in my own small way, the things I've learned through this Award will continue through my children too. Whether it's taking our rubbish home, noticing the wildlife around us, or simply spending more time outdoors together, I hope these small acts of care and respect for nature become habits they carry with them throughout their lives and one day pass on to their own children. If that happens, then perhaps John Muir's legacy will continue through all of us.

This concludes my personal reflection moving on to my academic presentation

Component 2 - Academic Script

This presentation will critically evaluate how participating in experiences such as the John Muir Award can support the philosophy and principles of Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS). It will explore how the principles of the Award and the activities undertaken align with early years theory and pedagogy, drawing on the work of theorists such as Froebel and Dewey alongside relevant Welsh policy. The presentation will also consider the strengths and limitations of the Award to evaluate whether experiences such as the John Muir Award can truly support a holistic approach to sustainability in early childhood education.

The John Muir Award is an environmental award run by the John Muir Trust, a conservation charity that cares for some of the UK's most significant wild landscapes. The scheme encourages people from all backgrounds to embark on a personal journey that helps them connect with, appreciate, and care for wild places. Through the four challenges Discover, Explore, Conserve and Share, participants create their own unique journey that deepens their understanding of the natural world while inspiring them to protect and conserve it. The Award encourages participants to immerse themselves in their chosen wild spaces through practical learning (Johnmuirtrust.org, 2025a).

This emphasis on practical learning closely aligns with the Froebelian approach to early childhood education. Theorist Friedrich Froebel believed that children learn best through hands-on experiences. He viewed children as unique individuals who construct knowledge by making connections and reach developmental milestones in their own way and at their own pace (Bruce, 2019). He argued that it is the adults' responsibility to provide meaningful play opportunities, enabling children to make connections between their own understanding of the world around them through authentic experiences (Tovey, 2013).

Watts (2022) states that meaningful engagement with nature goes beyond practitioners offering outdoor space for physical play; they have a role in assisting with deep emotional connections to the natural world. Tinney (2023) similarly

recognises the important role practitioners play in providing high-quality outdoor learning. However, she argues that this can only be achieved when practitioners receive appropriate professional training. Tinney (2023) emphasises that practitioners need time to build their confidence, reflect on their practice and develop the knowledge and skills required to deliver effective outdoor learning experiences. Without appropriate support and training, a lack of confidence can limit a practitioner's ability to provide meaningful and engaging outdoor learning experiences for children.

The John Muir Award provides guidance to support participants throughout their journey, however it also recognises that everyone's experience will be unique. Rather than following a pre-constructed programme of learning, participants are encouraged to develop their own understanding and personal connection with the natural environment.

Dewey's (1925) philosophical concepts also recognised the value of experiential learning, suggesting that true understanding of the natural world develops through interaction within real environments. Furthermore, he believed experiencing nature alone was not enough, and emphasised the importance of reflecting on experiences, as reflection allows people an opportunity to transform their experience into learning. Dewey recognised that people and their environments are interconnected. This perspective is promoted in the John Muir Award, as participants are encouraged to reflect and share their experience, enabling a deeper understanding of the natural environment and their role in protecting it.

Nature-based experiences also contribute to children's understanding of Cynefin, a key principle within the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2019). Cynefin refers to a sense of belonging and connection; for example, this can be a physical or emotional connection to a community or a place (Cwlwm, 2016). Welsh Government (2024) aims to support children in developing a strong sense of cynefin by helping them build a sense of belonging and connection to their local community and environment. This contributes to the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales, enabling children to become ethically informed citizens who understand the importance of caring for others and the world around them.

By fostering respect for their environment, children begin to understand the importance of sustainability from an early age. Johnmuirtrust.org (2025b) agrees that engaging in practical activities such as the John Muir Award, can help children develop an authentic sense of cynefin. Through these early opportunities to connect with the local community and the natural world, children are more likely to become environmentally responsible individuals who will develop lifelong values and habits that encourage them to care for and protect the world for years to come.

The emphasis on developing environmentally responsible citizens is not a new priority within the Welsh curriculum. The Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS, 2008) have long argued that education should encompass a holistic approach to a more sustainable future. These principles continue to influence Welsh education policy and are reflected in the Curriculum for Wales today (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009).

Building on Curriculum for Wales, it is now compulsory for all maintained education settings in Wales to include Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS) within the curriculum (Tinney and Hurst, Cited in Boyd, Hirst and Siraj-Blatchford, 2018). ECEfS is an approach that encourages children to become active participants in creating a more sustainable future. It recognises young children as capable learners (Jordan, 2023). Furthermore, Davis and Elliott (2024) state that the ECEfS goes beyond simply teaching children about nature; instead, it adopts a holistic approach that empowers them to think critically and make more informed choices relating to environmental issues, caring for wildlife, and working together towards a more sustainable future.

This view of children as competent and active participants closely aligns with Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (UNCRC), which states that children should have a right to an education that develops a respect for the natural environment. Although the UNCRC (1989) remains an essential foundation for early childhood education, Davis and Elliott (2024) argue that it is no longer sufficient on their own.

They suggest that achieving sustainability requires the education for sustainability to also consider the well-being of all living things and the planet that future generations

will inherit. One approach to addressing these challenges is through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations (2015), a global framework that considers more than just the environment; it also includes health, communities, and the economy, suggesting that everything is intertwined. This holistic approach has set a challenge as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and aims to support people in understanding their relationship with the wider world and their role in contributing to positive change.

Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) reinforces the central importance of both rights and sustainability towards a prosperous and healthy Wales and highlights the continued relevance of these areas to young children's education in Wales. (Tinney and Hurst, cited in Boyd, Hirst and Siraj-Blatchford, 2018).

A potential criticism of nature-based sustainability programmes such as the John Muir Award is that they can become one-off projects rather than encouraging a lifelong commitment to sustainability. The Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2024) promote a holistic understanding of sustainability by taking into consideration the wider social, economic and environmental systems. In contrast, the John Muir Award primarily focuses on conserving a natural environment and the wildlife living there.

Conversely, Active Learning Centres (2023) says that the John Muir award aims to develop a deep respect for the natural environment as well as promote personal development and well-being. These outcomes align with several Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 3, good health and well-being and Goal 15, life on land, suggesting that the Award can contribute to holistic sustainability when it is part of everyday learning rather than an isolated event.

In conclusion, the John Muir Award supports many of the key principles of ECEfS by encouraging meaningful hands-on experiences in a nature. These principles closely align with the theories of Froebel and Dewey, as well as the aims of the Curriculum for Wales. However, although the Award makes a valuable contribution to developing environmental awareness, it has limitations when compared with the ECEfS, which fosters a holistic approach to sustainability, as the award's primary

focus is environmental conservation rather than the wider social and economic aspects of sustainable development goals.

Therefore, the John Muir Award makes a valuable contribution to sustainability education by encouraging connection with the natural world. However, to support a holistic understanding of sustainability, it should be considered alongside wider learning that also explores the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development.

This concludes my academic writing, thank you for listening to my presentation today.

Component 3 - Academic Reference List

Active Learning Centres. (2023). *What is the John Muir award and how can we help with it?* - Active Learning Centres. [online] Available at:

<https://activelearningcentres.co.uk/blog/what-is-the-john-muir-award-and-how-can-we-help-with-it/> [Accessed 11 July 2026].

Bruce, T. (2019). *Early Childhood Education : the Selected Works of Tina Bruce*. Florence: Routledge.

Cwlwm (2016). *Cynefin* | cwlwm. [online] Available at: <https://cwlwm.org.uk/cynefin> [Accessed 10 July 2026].

Davis, J.M. and Elliott, S. (2024) *Young children & the environment : early education for sustainability*. Third edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; Cambridge University Press.

Dewey, J. (1925) *Experience and nature*. Chicago ; Open Court Publishing Company.

Jordan, C. (2023). *Research Digest: Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS)*. [online] Children and Nature Network. Available at:

<https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/research-digest-early-childhood-education-for-sustainability-ecefs/> (Accessed: 10 July 2026.)

Johnmuirtrust.org (2025a). *Engagement Initiative | John Muir Award*. Available at: <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/award> (Accessed 7 July 2026).

Johnmuirtrust.org (2025b). John Muir Award and the Curriculum for Wales Available at:

https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/assets/000/004/056/JMT_WalesCurriculum_Apr2025_Spreads_original.pdf?1745491727 (Accessed: 10 July 2026).

Tinney, G. (2023) "Big changes! The Great Outdoors and the Curriculum for Wales."

Tinney, G. (2013) THE HARMONY DEBATES Exploring a practical philosophy for a sustainable future. Available at:

<https://repository.uwtsd.ac.uk/id/eprint/1544/1/Harmony%20Debates%20Glenda%20Tinney.pdf> [Accessed 10 July 2026].

Tinney, G and Hurst, N cited in Boyd, D., Hirst, N. and Siraj-Blatchford, J. (2018) *Understanding sustainability in early childhood education across the UK*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315642505>.

Tovey, H. (2013) *Bringing the Froebel approach to your early years practice*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203818374>.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (UNCRC) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Treaty no. 27531. United Nations Treaty Series, 1577, pp. 3-178. Available at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf (Accessed: 10 July 2026)

United Nations (2015). *The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)*. [online] United Nations. Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> (Accessed: 10 July 2026).

United Nations (2024). *United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs)*. [online] United Nations Western Europe. Available at: <https://unric.org/en/united-nations-sustainable-development-goals/> (Accessed: 10 July 2026).

Watts, T. (2022). *Froebelian Pedagogy as Everyday Activism 85 Froebelian Pedagogy as Everyday Activism in Support of a Sustainability Agenda*. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1341429.pdf> (Accessed: 10 July 2026).

Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015). Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. *Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 - FGC - CYM*. [online] FGC - CYM. Available at: <https://futuregenerations.wales/discover/about->

[future-generations-commissioner/future-generations-act-2015/](#) (Accessed: 10 July 2026).

Welsh Assembly Government (2009). Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) Developing our Evidence Base Information. [online] Available at:

https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/524/7/091124evidencebaseen_Redacted.pdf

(Accessed: 11 July 2026).

Welsh Government (2019). *Humanities: Introduction - Hwb*. [online] hwb.gov.wales.

Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/humanities/> [Accessed 10 July 2026].

Welsh Government (2024). *A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings*.

[online] Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/1f581142-6b91-41e4-845d-3d6c7765df20/a-curriculum-for-funded-non-maintained-nursery-settings.pdf>

(Accessed: 10 July 2026).