



nature's
voice

EVERY CHILD OUTDOORS

Children need nature. Nature needs children.



SUMMARY REPORT



INTRODUCTION

The RSPB believes that every child should be entitled to regular contact with the natural environment.

I remember as a child my first school field visit to Shorne Marshes, in Kent, and discovering the amazing diversity of life in our lakes and ponds.

Every year, thousands of children engage with nature with the RSPB, including 60,000 schoolchildren who visit our 40 outdoor learning centres across the UK and 100,000 children who take part in the Big and Little Schools' Birdwatches in their school grounds. We have over 190,000 junior members, including more than 40,000 teenagers.

Every day, we see and hear about the fantastic impression these experiences make on children and young people – on their learning and discovery, their health and emotional wellbeing and on inspiring them to be environmentally responsible citizens.

Many of our nature reserves throughout the UK also offer activities for families to enjoy together, giving them the chance – and perhaps more importantly, the confidence – to try new things and experience the natural world in an informal and fun way.

To many people it would seem obvious and unquestionable that exploring the world around you is a crucial part of childhood, whether that is through climbing trees and collecting conkers, looking for insects or feeding birds. Unfortunately, as a survey last year starkly demonstrated, this is far from the case, and the amount of time and contact children are having with nature is declining steeply.

Our *Every Child Outdoors* research – summarised in this document – draws together the findings from the wide range of research that has been carried out into the positive impacts that contact with nature has on children, as well as on the environment. It also explores some of the consequences of the loss of such experiences and, sadly, the increasingly used term of Nature Deficit Disorder to describe the phenomenon.

Finally, we present new independent research from Ipsos MORI, commissioned by the RSPB, on the most remembered childhood experiences of nature amongst the general public. This also revealed that the vast majority of people agree that these experiences are still important to children today, and that schools should play a role in providing them to all children.

The RSPB is committed to continuing to play our part in ensuring that as many children as possible have contact with nature, and working with partner organisations to do so. We believe it is essential that all parts of government and society play their role too.



Dr Mike Clarke
Chief Executive



CHILDREN NEED NATURE

Over the last decade, a large amount of research has been carried out into the diverse benefits for children of contact with nature and outdoor experiences. These benefits include positive impacts on education, physical health, emotional wellbeing and personal and social skills, including the development of responsible citizens.

This summary report draws together the main findings and recommendations from this rich evidence. As well as academic research from a number of countries, the research includes official reports from national schools inspectorates, which reflects the increasing recognition of the role that learning outside the classroom plays in enabling children to experience nature.

Some of the key conclusions are:

EDUCATION – “First-hand experiences... can help to make subjects more vivid and interesting for pupils and enhance their understanding... [and] could make an important contribution to pupils’ future economic wellbeing and to preparing them for the next stage of their lives.” (Ofsted, 2008)

HEALTH AND WELLBEING – “Children increase their physical activity levels when outdoors and are attracted to nature... All children with ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] may benefit from more time in contact with nature...” (Bird, 2007)

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS – “Experience of the outdoors and wild adventure space has the potential to confer a wide range of benefits on young people... Development of a positive self-image, confidence in one’s abilities and experience of dealing with uncertainty can be important in helping young people face the wider world and develop enhanced social skills.” (Ward Thompson et al, 2006)

The findings are presented according to the separate areas of benefit shown above, but there is a great deal of overlap between these areas and the benefits reinforce and catalyse each other. This not only highlights the extent of the positive impacts on children and young people that contact with nature can have, but also the broader effects these impacts have on schools, communities and society.

A list of the key research and books discussed is included at the end of the report to provide a starting point from which you can find out more information. Our full *Every Child Outdoors* research report is available from www.rspb.org.uk/childrenneednature

Evidence of educational benefits

The majority of research into the educational benefits that contact with nature has on children is related to the practice of learning outside the classroom – ranging from the use of school grounds to residential fieldwork.

A review of the broad range of research in this area found that “substantial evidence exists to indicate that fieldwork, properly conceived, adequately planned, well taught and effectively followed up, offers learners opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills in ways that add value to their everyday experiences in the classroom” (Rickinson et al, 2004).

Another study defines the outcomes of learning outdoors as “changes in thinking, feeling and/or behaviour resulting directly or indirectly from outdoor education” (Dillon et al, 2005). It identifies four specific types of impact:

COGNITIVE IMPACTS – concerning knowledge, understanding and other academic outcomes.

AFFECTIVE IMPACTS – encompassing attitudes, values, beliefs and self-perceptions.

INTERPERSONAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS – including communication skills, leadership and teamwork.

PHYSICAL AND BEHAVIOURAL IMPACTS – relating to physical fitness, physical skills, personal behaviours and social actions.

Looking more closely at cognitive impacts, “both students and their teachers reported increases in knowledge and understanding as a result of experiences in the outdoor classroom. Whenever students were asked about their learning, they were generally able to explain something that they had seen, learned or understood on the visits... Developments in knowledge and understanding appeared to be from across a range of cognitive domains” (Dillon et al, 2005).

One explanation for this is that “outdoor natural space provides additional opportunities for critical thinking, creative inquiry and problem solving; fundamental life skills permitting students to ‘think critically about issues pertinent to their lives and the world outside the classroom’” (Pretty et al, 2009).

In February 2010, Northern Ireland’s Education and Training Inspectorate reported that “out-of-classroom learning opportunities provide the learners with inspiring, sensory and memorable experiences that bring the curriculum to life in an inclusive way.”

They recommend that “schools need to... provide a range of opportunities for out-of-classroom learning, including visits to local and regional areas of environmental interest and outdoor education centres, including field centres” (ETI, 2010).

This reinforces the findings of Ofsted – the schools inspectorate in England – which undertook an inspection of learning outside the classroom across a sample of schools in 2008. They concluded that:

“When planned and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils’ personal, social and emotional development... [and] could make an important contribution to pupils’ future economic wellbeing and to preparing them for the next stage of their lives.”

“...learning outside the classroom can also help to combat under-achievement... Pupils whose behaviour in other circumstances had been reported as poor often responded well to involvement in high quality, stimulating activities [outdoors].”



Evidence of positive impacts on health and wellbeing

“There is a large body of research that illustrates the importance of environmental experience and contact with nature in childhood to promote children’s physical and mental health and wellbeing.” (DCSF, 2010)

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Below are the key findings from broad reviews of studies and research relating to children, nature and physical health.

- ▶ Modern life has brought astonishing technological advances, but it has also led to rapid changes in ways of living that have pervasive health outcomes.
- ▶ Lifestyles have so changed that obesity has within a generation risen in incidence to take it from 3–6% of adult populations to more than 25% in many industrialised countries.
- ▶ Wales has among the highest levels of overweight or obese children in European and North American countries, at 21% and 18% for 15-year-old boys and girls respectively.
- ▶ The cost of physical inactivity to the economy in England is calculated to be £8.2 billion per year (£1.7 billion for the NHS, £5.4 billion for work absence and £1 billion for early mortality).
- ▶ There is strong evidence to show that by the time children leave secondary school their attitude to exercise is highly predictive of whether they will be physically active as adults.
- ▶ The strongest relationship is with the quality of exercise they have experienced, as opposed to the quantity of exercise.
- ▶ Nature is a major motivating factor for exercise. There is very strong evidence that being outdoors is the most powerful correlate of physical activity, particularly in pre-school children.
- ▶ Children increase their physical activity levels when outdoors and are attracted to nature.

Sources: Bird (2004); Pretty et al (2009); WAG (2009)

MENTAL WELLBEING

Building on the research on physical health benefits, researchers subsequently reviewed studies about nature and mental wellbeing, finding:

- ▶ The estimated total cost of mental health in England is £77 billion per year.
- ▶ 8.3% of children and young people aged 5–15 years in Scotland are reported to have a mental disorder. This figure includes emotional disorders, conduct disorders and hyperkinetic disorders.
- ▶ There is a steady increase in the use of medication in childhood mental illness. More than 40,000 children now use anti-depressants, following a sharp rise over recent years.
- ▶ The immediate outcomes of contact with nearby nature include enjoyment, relaxation and lowered stress levels. The longer-term, indirect impacts also include increased levels of satisfaction with home and work life, and with life in general.
- ▶ Children with stressful life events are more likely to develop mental health problems. There is evidence that children who experience stressful events in their lives are less stressed and have a higher global self-worth the more they are exposed to nature.
- ▶ Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a significant public health problem that affects 5–10% of school children in the UK. It is characterised by overactive and impulsive behaviour and difficulty in paying attention, causing disruption to those around and reducing the chance of success as an adult.
- ▶ Outdoor activities in nature appear to improve symptoms of ADHD in children by 30% compared with urban outdoor activities and threefold compared with the indoor environment. All children with ADHD may benefit from more time in contact with nature, greener routes to school and more natural views from their windows.

Sources: Bird (2007); SDC (2008); Muñoz (2009)



Evidence of contributions to personal and social skills

As well as developing knowledge and understanding, and having health and wellbeing impacts, experiences with nature have also been shown to provide many personal and social skills and benefits.

Research into teenagers' informal (out-of-school) encounters found that "experience of the outdoors and wild adventure space has the potential to confer a wide range of benefits on young people... Development of a positive self-image, confidence in one's abilities and experience of dealing with uncertainty can be important in helping young people face the wider world and develop enhanced social skills" (Ward Thompson et al, 2006).

Other research into outdoor learning found that "one of the main benefits of outdoor activities... appeared to be the development of social and interpersonal skills... These novel experiences, in addition to the freedom and encouragement that children were given to try new activities, were also thought to be helping to increase students' confidence and self-esteem... Educators reported that such activities gave students an opportunity to meet new people, with different teaching styles, and also involved activities which required co-operation and teamwork" (Dillon et al, 2005).

Developing the mental wellbeing benefits, research has also been carried out into impacts on aggression and crime. Several studies support the belief that contact with nature can reduce aggressive behaviour, possibly due to the restorative process in the brain that helps reduce irritability. The subject of these studies ranges from domestic violence in the inner city to aggressive behaviour in Alzheimer's patients (Bird, 2007).

One of the theories behind the mental wellbeing impacts – the Attention Restoration Theory – shows that "with increased contact with nature the brain can be restored from fatigue and so reduce many unwanted symptoms such as impulsive behaviour, irritability and aggression. Studies point to 50% less crime and domestic violence in families with views of increased vegetation in a poor housing estate compared to identical blocks with no vegetation" (Bird, 2007).

The impacts have even been shown to extend beyond individuals into the local community and environment. Studies from the USA found that educational programmes relating to the local community and environment improved young people's attachment to place, civic engagement and environmental stewardship (DCSF, 2010).

They also found evidence that environmental action builds young people's capabilities for further participation and contributes to both personal and community transformation.



NATURE NEEDS CHILDREN

“Children’s knowledge of biodiversity is in decline at a time when we need future generations to be more engaged and aware in order to halt its loss. There is a very real need to educate our children as the future guardians of our planet, to provide them with the knowledge they need today to preserve the natural world for tomorrow.”

Dr Ahmed Djoghlaif, Executive Secretary of the
United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity

Building on the positive impacts of contact with nature for children, research has also been carried out into whether or not this contact is beneficial to the environment. Studies have shown that, as well as enhancing young people’s resilience to changes in their environment, outdoor learning also develops their environmental responsibility (DCSF, 2010). Significantly, it has emerged that “an adult’s attitude to the environment and time spent outdoors in green space is strongly influenced by their experience as a child” (Bird, 2007).

The University of Essex’s Interdisciplinary Centre for Environment and Society recently published a detailed report into nature, childhood, health and life pathways. This reinforced previous findings of a strong correlation between ecological knowledge and frequency of visits to green spaces, and that it is likely that children who have free play in nature at a young age retain a connection to nature in adult life (Pretty et al, 2009).

The study outlines a pair of theoretical life pathways between which all our lives are shaped, in part determined by childhood contact with nature (as originally proposed by Wells and Lekies in 2006). On one pathway – where as children they were ‘free-range outdoor’ – people live longer with a better quality of life; on the other – where as children they stayed indoors and became disconnected from nature – they die earlier and often have a lower quality of life. On the first pathway, adults tend to engage with natural places, be active, be connected to people and society, eat healthy foods, be members of groups and volunteer more.

Reflecting these connections, in 2009 Ofsted recommended that “schools should... ensure that all pupils have access to out-of-classroom learning to support their understanding of the need to care for their environment and to promote their physical and mental wellbeing.”

Northern Ireland’s Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI, 2010) complements this recommendation, stating “schools have a vital role in helping children make sense of these [first-hand] experiences and in fostering a reasoned and sensitive concern for the quality of the environment and for the present and future management of the earth’s resources.”

CONNECTEDNESS TO NATURE

Last year, the RSPB looked into the relationship between the feelings of connectedness to nature that UK adults have and their beliefs about environmental concerns and how this influences their behaviours.

Connectedness to nature is assessed on a scale by asking a number of questions relating to ecological knowledge and understanding, such as whether or not the respondent thinks of the natural world as a community to which they belong, or if they have a deep understanding of how their actions affect the natural world (Mayer and Frantz, 2004).

Our previously unpublished work found that over three-quarters of people who felt connected to nature had changed their behaviours in the previous year out of concern for the environment – compared to significantly fewer of those who did not feel connected. These pro-environmental behaviours include attending a public hearing or meeting about the environment, and no longer buying a product they previously would have because it caused environmental problems.

MAKING A CONTRIBUTION NOW

In addition to inspiring behaviours in the future, children who are connected to nature also take immediate action to the direct benefit of the environment.

In 2007, v – the national young volunteers service – undertook research investigating the passions of young people, and examining their main concerns regarding global and local issues. They found that 75% of the young people surveyed were concerned about climate change, and 60% about their local environment.

However, many young people were also not sure how to help address these issues or believed they had nothing to offer.

The RSPB offers a variety of ways for children and young people to overcome these barriers, and tackle their local and global concerns. Over 5,600 children are taking part in our Wildlife Action Awards – at home, in school or as part of a community or youth group. This scheme awards young people who are committed to undertaking a range of on-going tasks that benefit wildlife, including

setting-up compost bins and taking part in wildlife surveys.

Since 2002, our junior membership has fundraised over £200,000 in support of our major campaigns, such as protecting the Sumatran rainforest. We also have over 200 conservation volunteers aged under 18 – regularly making a hands-on contribution to protecting the environment.





EVERY CHILD OUTDOORS?

“Children’s view of nature is increasingly distant, abstract, and utilitarian. However affluent, their lives are impoverished by diminishing contact with nature. Their imaginations, simulated by television and computers, are being impoverished ecologically, socially, and spiritually.”

Professor David W. Orr, Environmental Studies and Politics, Oberlin College, Ohio

THE EXTINCTION OF EXPERIENCE

Despite the advantages to children and young people from contact with the natural environment – for their education, health and wellbeing, and social skills – as well as critical benefits to the environment, research has shown that the amount of time and experiences children have with nature is declining.

In April 2009, Natural England – the Westminster Government’s environmental advisor – published a report about childhood and nature. This shows that less than 10% of children today play in natural places such as woodlands, countryside and heaths, when compared with 40% of children 30–40 years ago.

In parallel over recent years, a significant decline in young peoples’ understanding of the natural environment has been widely reported, particularly in urban areas of industrialised communities. The culmination of this phenomenon has been described as the ‘extinction of experience’, whereby children are experiencing nature far less than ever before in history (Kahn and Kellert, 2002; Pyle, 2003).

Professor David Orr has questioned the role of the commercialisation of childhood in this decline. He notes that “we have little idea of the long-term effects of excessive materialism on the child, but it is reasonable to think that its hallmarks are satiation, shallowness, and the loss of deeper feelings having to do with a secure and stable identity rooted in the self, relationships, and place” (Orr, 2002).

UK research has also shown that alongside children losing their connection with nature, there is also a “disparity in children’s access to high quality natural environments. All children benefit from opportunities provided by access to outdoor space but these benefits are not equally distributed. Whilst children have universal rights and needs, poverty places severe limits upon the extent to which they can be recognised” (Thomas and Thompson, 2004).



NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER

In 2005, the American author Richard Louv published his influential book *Last Child in the Woods*. Louv brings together many of the early studies about children and nature that have subsequently led to a great deal of the research in this report.

He discusses how children now wander less, discover less and are losing some important connections to nature and place. He also suggests some of the reasons behind this – the commercialisation of childhood, parental fear of crime and road traffic, loss of natural spaces for free play and the

attractions of indoor alternatives, such as computer games and TV.

Of perhaps most impact was the phrase that Louv coined to capture the negative consequences of the extinction of experiences of nature: Nature Deficit Disorder. While not referring to a specific medical condition amongst individual children, Louv suggests that the term “does offer a way to think about the problem and the possibilities – for children, and for the rest of us as well.”

He goes on to state that:

“Nature Deficit Disorder describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of emotional and physical illnesses. The disorder can be detected in individuals, families, and communities.”



Reconnecting Children and Nature – new research from the RSPB

In July 2010, the RSPB commissioned new research into the important issue of childhood experiences of nature. Building in particular on Natural England's *Childhood and Nature* report, we asked Ipsos MORI to look into which outdoor experiences a representative sample of the British population remembered, and their views about them.

The first part of our research asked the public which of 12 outdoor experiences they remembered having as a child. These included climbing trees, looking for insects, swimming in a river and feeding birds.

For each of the 12 activities, at least half of the people remembered having experiences of them in their childhood. The most remembered experiences were climbing trees and collecting or playing conkers, both of which were remembered by 70% of the public surveyed.

Only 5% of people reported not having had, or not remembering, any of the experiences asked about. In other words, nearly all of the general public (95%) remember outdoor experiences of the natural environment from their childhood.

However, these over-arching figures also conceal the fact that significantly more of those aged 15–34 years claimed not to have had, or remember having, these childhood experiences compared to those aged over 55 years (8%, compared to 2%).

Given the broad positive impacts to children and nature from such experiences, and evidence of a sharp decline in children today having them, the second part of our research asked for the public's views on this issue, including how important they considered them.

- 92% agreed that it is important that children have these types of experiences today.

As much of the research into the relationship between children and nature relates to educational benefits, and the contribution of learning outside the classroom, we also asked about the role schools should play in ensuring every child has contact with nature.

- 82% agreed that schools should play a role in ensuring all children have these types of experiences.

Collectively, this evidence clearly emphasises why it is important for governments and schools to recognise the crucial role they should play in entitling all children to experience, enjoy, learn and benefit from contact with the natural environment.

OUR CALL TO GOVERNMENT

The RSPB believes that there are four key areas where government action should be taken:

- Provide adequate funding and guidance for schools to be able to ensure that every disadvantaged child and young person has the opportunity to have regular first-hand experiences of the natural environment.
- Ensure the whole teaching profession is confident, competent and committed to teach outside the classroom by including the necessary skills and understanding across the repertoire of practices included in initial teacher training and early career and ongoing professional development.
- Enshrine the value of outdoor learning and environmental responsibility in national curricula.
- Support schools inspectorates in embedding the assessment and reporting of schools' performance in providing outdoor teaching, including through the suitable training of all inspectors.

A close-up photograph of a child's hand reaching down towards a small white daisy flower in a grassy field. The child is wearing a blue and white striped shirt. The background is slightly blurred, showing more grass and a red and white patterned object.

92%

of people asked agreed that it is important that children have outdoor experiences today

82%

agreed that schools should play a role in ensuring all children have these types of experiences

Ipsos MORI questioned 1,012 members of the British public, aged 15 years and over, between 2-8 July 2010 as part of their weekly face-to-face Capibus omnibus survey. The data was weighted to ensure that the profile used was representative of the over 15 years British adult population.

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EVERY CHILD OUTDOORS

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www.rspb.org.uk/childrenneednature



The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing – help us keep it that way.

RSPB Wildlife Explorers is the junior membership of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

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