

## *Learning outside the classroom .... on your doorstep*



### Question: Can schools provide quality nature learning experiences in the urban parks on their doorsteps?

Teachers have traditionally visited a variety of places for learning outside the classroom experiences, but may increasingly be prohibited from travelling very far by rising transport costs. This short article explores our experience of providing learning in local urban green spaces very close to schools. We suggest that these spaces are often an underutilised resource and that through working closely with schools we can build capacity embedding a culture of learning and fieldwork within schools that will be sustained into the future.

In September 2010, conservation charity Plantlife launched a two year Local Schools Partnership initiative as part of their Wild About Plants project, and in association with Sefton Borough Council (Parks and Green Spaces) and primary schools in Sefton, Merseyside. The initiative links schools to local parks and provides school-based and family learning opportunities throughout the year. Seven schools are currently involved with three more signing up for the academic year 2011/2012.

In our first year more than 2000 pupils have experienced multiple learning experiences in their local parks – some of these have taken a traditional environmental education route for example exploring nest building materials, taking

part in nature awareness activities and surveys, whilst others have had a more cross curricular dimension, for example poetry of place. At an interim workshop held in June partners identified positive outcomes for schools and the wider community. Some of their comments are shown in the table on the right.

Plantlife's Wild About Plants Liverpool Officer, Kate Deane, worked alongside park rangers and teachers delivering a variety of different activities to school pupils in Sefton parks. She noted that even within a year attitudes of pupils and staff have changed. "Pupils are more ready to go outside and know what to expect. They have gained more independence as learners." In addition benefits being transferred to the home environment have been noticed with pupils reporting that they have walked to parks in the evening or at weekends with their parents to show them what they have been learning. "I am really pleased about the legacy that this initiative will leave – we know that schools will continue to use these places for learning well after the project is completed, as the teachers now have the confidence to take groups there and run interesting sessions for their classes. I really enjoy the work too as it enables me to see pupil progression over a longer period of time."

Teachers have reported greater confidence in facilitating learning in outdoor environments, in some cases have stated they wish to adopt part of their local park and identified how great it is to have a new classroom on their doorstep. In terms of the wider community, other park



## FOR SCHOOLS

- Children build up a relationship with their local green spaces and gain a greater appreciation of their benefits for the whole community. Children will be much more likely to see them in a positive way.
- Low no cost resources. Increased attitudes towards environmental care.
- Involvement with nature; improve and extend learning environment to outside spaces; increase sense of achievement and ownership; pride and confidence in pupils.
- A free natural resource based in the local community where the pupils live which will foster guardianship in parks and green spaces.
- Opportunities for less academic children to shine; more ownership of schools and local environment.

## FOR THE WIDER COMMUNITY

- Seeing local children in a positive light. Being able to see at first hand what children are doing to support and protect local green spaces.
- Local communities united against anti-social behaviours within park area.
- Community spaces used – increased involvement (children using parks with family members) community environmental care.
- Parental involvement in non academic spaces may gain more support than normal.
- Children being more responsible; taking ownership; working together with wider community.
- Children interacting with nature – peer sharing of enthusiasm – they grow up and share experiences of these spaces with their children.



users are generally positive about spaces being used for learning and in one park, students from a local secondary school walking through the park showed interest in what the younger pupils were doing. Kate believes this community interest is reducing the likelihood of pupils' work and parks being vandalised.

Tony Hearn, Head Park Ranger at Sefton Borough Council says "The Park Ranger Service is very keen for local schools to play a major role in the parks as both a learning environment and a place for recreation. We are keen for local schoolchildren to take ownership of their local park, and if we engage them in their parks now, they and their families are more likely play a part in the park's future. We would like all schools to adopt their local park and turn them into outdoor classrooms, places to learn, play and grow up in."

Year 5 pupils from one school completed their John Muir Discovery Award through the initiative and in June shared their experiences in a whole school assembly. In talking about what they had learnt pupils felt that being involved in the scheme had made them "wildlife mad", they had "learnt that nature was right under their nose" and that they had "learnt to respect for and care for our environment and be grateful for our wonderful places in Bootle". For one pupil, a favourite activity was bird watching "because you got a chance to know what it is like to see different kinds of birds".

Whilst local urban green spaces do not always offer the wealth of biodiversity found on nature reserves or in the wider countryside, we should not underestimate the value of these spaces for starting a journey for many young people in their connections with nature. We should also recognise the importance that learning locally provides in terms of giving children meaningful experiences and helping to embed understanding about their natural world. This work has shown us not to underestimate what an adventure is for a child unused to playing and learning outdoors, and

it has opened our eyes to the potential adventures on the doorsteps of so many schools. These experiences have convinced us that urban parks are underutilised, and can be used extremely effectively offering scope for frequency of experience, with benefits for the schools and the local community.

A full evaluation report from two years of local schools partnership work will be completed in August 2012 and we are keen to hear from anyone involved in similar work to compare experiences.■

### NOTES

The Wild About Plants project is a national project led by Plantlife ([www.plantlife.org.uk](http://www.plantlife.org.uk)), which received a grant through Natural England's Access to Nature grant stream funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces programme. The project aims to support people access and enjoy their local natural spaces and learn about their local environment with a particular emphasis on wild plants. The project runs a mixture of activities and opportunities for children (aged 4-11) and adults, particularly parents and older adults. Many schools and organisations have participated in project activities through being able to download resources from the project website [www.wildaboutplants.org.uk](http://www.wildaboutplants.org.uk). The project team also works directly with schools and community groups. The project is managed by Felicity Harris with Kate Deane coordinating the work in Liverpool described above. Felicity Harris is now on maternity leave and any thoughts or comments should be addressed to Rachel Jones – [Rachel.jones@plantlife.org.uk](mailto:Rachel.jones@plantlife.org.uk) who is now managing the project.



### Author's Notes

Felicity Harris has worked in education and outdoor learning for over 10 years, starting as a geography and outdoor learning teacher in secondary schools before moving to run environmental learning projects in the charitable sector. She became an APIOL in October 2010 and currently manages Plantlife's Wild About Plants project.

**Photographs:** Diane Whitehill