

## Let nature speak for itself

**“The most important skill to develop.. is not identifying species or rock types but simply noticing detail, large or small, in the landscape, and having noticed it, bringing an active attention to bear, exploring not only with the eyes but through smell, taste, touch or hearing as well.”**  
*Rob Collister, Mountain Guide*

Many people place rather little value on biodiversity simply because they are not aware of it, they don't notice the detail or the *texture* of our environment. This is partly because we now spend so little time outdoors, and most of us are no longer directly dependent on the environment. It is no longer our home. When we go out and explore, when we open and apply all of our senses to it, when we become *familiar* with it, we not only discover a rich and fascinating world, but develop a deep seated love for it.

When interviewing people for this project, we usually asked about techniques: what really gets people interested in nature? There were two common but very different responses.

Those working in large scale visitor attractions (such as Deep Sea World; Scottish Seabird Centre) considered a good talker/presenter/interpreter to be hugely important. If you put someone out there to explain, to tell stories, people will gather round. And if they are good, people will remember.

On the other hand, the “solo” technique was widely acclaimed by all those working in outdoor and environmental education. This is where people are simply asked to stop talking, to stop asking questions when out on a walk – for anything between 5 minutes and an hour or more. People immediately start to look, smell, listen, touch – *explore with their senses*. And this works tremendously well with people aged from 5 to 80.

The reality is of course that you can't do solo in a busy, bustling visitor attraction, and even if you could, the experience would be nothing like so rich. The wildlife sounds are not located in space. Smells are lacking.

*“The name is not the thing; the map is not the territory”*

Except for special events (which are important) you can't touch, and certainly not alone. And you often have to compete to see something of interest. Its all about names and ideas. This is not meant as a criticism of these attractions – they have much to offer as discussed in *“A grand day out”*, but it does demonstrate the relative richness of a real outdoor experience, which the solo technique so simply and delightfully illustrates.

Uwe Stoneman, now at Vane Farm in Fife, took people out on guided walks for seven years as a ranger with Highland Council, and used the technique regularly. He says it never failed to stimulate. Elspeth English of *“Hands on Environmental Education”* says it works equally well with young children. Outward Bound centres have been using the techniques for years, as part of raising awareness of the environment around them on the one hand, and as a form of personal development on the other. They too say the impact is huge.

What this tells us is that if you get people outside – of any age – and re-awaken their sensory skills, they will learn about nature, they will become familiar with it, and they

will probably end up loving it and caring for it. Another question we asked the professionals we interviewed when gathering this material was: what got you interested, what got you connected with nature? There was an almost universal answer: *playing in the fields and woods, and along the rivers and burns when they were young*. This became their home, and they returned to it later in their professional lives. For a few it was a more intense experience in their teens or even later– a magical moment on a mountain or at sea, alone or with friends or lovers.

While this suggests that engaging people with biodiversity is surprisingly easy - if you get people out there, nature<sup>1</sup> will speak for itself – it is also profoundly worrying. So many factors now contrive against people getting out there at all, and especially young people. Very few children walk to school, and certainly not through fields and woods. Very few play outside – on the one hand it is thought of as dangerous, and on the other the in-house entertainment is in a different league from that we used to have. The screen, the car, busy parents, performance criteria, and a culture of fear and regulation mean that no-one gets out much, apart from health enthusiasts out for a jog or a cycle between meetings - and they see more sweat than wildlife. This is why initiatives such as the John Muir Award or the outdoor work of Foyers Primary are so important. But there is another message here: every parent can have a much greater role. *Just by chucking kids out of the house.*

It is notable that some other European countries – especially Germany and Scandinavia – have a much less class-bound and house-bound culture for young people. They spend much more time out of doors, wandering the beaches, fields and woods. Graham White quotes a Danish education professional in response to a question about what they are actually learning: “*the kids are busy having a childhood and learning how to be a human being*”.

Something we have noticed in carrying out this work, is the tremendous variety and quality of leaflets and interpretive materials about wildlife in Scotland. Of concern however is that they are rather little used. These materials are not the best way of engaging people with nature, although they are a tremendous resource for people who are already interested. Perhaps we need some re-alignment here: a bit more effort to get people out, and once achieved, we can service and strengthen their interest with fine interpretive materials. We are putting the cart before the horse, perhaps because we are so seduced by screens and exquisite wildlife images.

Another recurrent theme in the various stories is doing and using. There is nothing new here: teachers and educationalists have known for years that people learn very little from listening; they learn or remember or understand from using and doing – or exploring for themselves. And they also learn from sharing – discussing and interpreting their experiences, writing about them, drawing, teaching. The John Muir Award is impressive here: it does not define what you should do or learn – it just ensures that you discover, explore, do something useful for the environment, and *share* your experience. The sharing reinforces the experience and the learning, as well as being a valuable activity in its own right.

For most people, going out and planting trees, making paths, clearing litter, bashing rhododendrons etc is quite simply a very social and satisfying experience. You work hard, have a laugh, and see something achieved at the end of the day. There are all

<sup>1</sup> I use the word nature rather than biodiversity in most places throughout this resource, because to me the former encompasses the latter but also so much more: landscape, geology, place – the natural environment in its broadest sense.

kinds of angles on this – social skills development, confidence building, social inclusion and community strengthening, practical skills, team work – quite apart from the positive contribution to greenspace development and nature conservation. The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, the Green Team, [Fife Air Cadets](#) and many others have been tremendously successful in promoting this for many years. The requirement to “do something to conserve it” in the John Muir Award also encourages this type of activity, and it usually goes down well.

But the reality is – and this applies to all the approaches – it does not appeal to everyone. Almost everyone we talked to emphasised this: you must understand your client. At [Vane Farm](#) the information officers are trained to assess the visitors needs – gently, in a non-intrusive way. Do they want to do something active? Do they want a guide? Do they want someone in the background who can answer questions? Do they want an entertaining guru, or comedian? Do they want to be left alone? Irene Watson of Art-Space Scotland also considers this crucial. Some people want structure – especially middle class children. They demand structure, thrive on it and question whether it is the right structure. More working class children typically respond to less structured events or teaching – where they are given free reign to do their thing.

Art – including painting, sculpture, poetry, photography - has cropped up as a recurrent theme in our discussions with people: as a stimulus to observation and creativity; as a way of getting people to work with and appreciate natural materials – the delightful variety of colour and texture and smell; and as a tool for sharing and remembering. We have reproduced some of the fruits of these initiatives in the case studies and in the [“gallery”](#), and they are testament to the success of many of the initiatives we explored.

There is something important here in terms of “engagement”. Art is interpretation of what people sense or feel in the widest sense, and nature, or natural materials can be involved in different ways. On the one hand they can be used for the artistic expression of an idea. On the other, art can be used as a way to find, explore and understand the materials of nature. In either case this is a very powerful form of engagement, and hugely different from more typical “awareness raising” or teaching approaches. It’s a refreshing contrast to the rain of performance indicators. As Irene Watson says: “its not about knowledge and information. There is no end, no starting point. Its about the individual”. Individual or group creativity inspired by exploring or using nature is a form of “pure” engagement. Perhaps we should say not only “let nature speak for itself”, but also “let nature speak through people”.

Some people are natural collectors. They love to identify, to count, to tick boxes. In the past they collected eggs or butterflies and built up impressive collections. Its all part of the hunter-gatherer instinct. There are many current initiatives (see for example [“Nature Detectives”](#)), and these have the added bonus of feeding into higher level monitoring of environmental change. Coupled with the internet this is developing into an impressive scientific tool at the same time as stimulating interest.

And then there are games. We feature just one example [here](#), but there are many current initiatives. These are a particularly effective way to get children interested in the wider issues – the impact they are having or may have on the wider environment. Perhaps this is more to do with education than engagement, but is equally important.

Finally we should say something about organisation. Partnership is the buzz word which ticks the boxes, attracts the grants, and there is much to commend it. But it is completely ineffective without two key elements: inspirational enthusiasm on the one

hand, and effective facilitation, organisation, and troubleshooting on the other. These rarely come together. When they do, people get engaged.

But that is for the projects, the initiatives. There has to be a wider campaign, to get people outside, and into the greenspace and countryside. Getting them, literally, *back in touch with nature*.

Please read the case studies.

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