

## OE-030 - Valleys Regional Park

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Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Bil arfaethedig – Bil Addysg Awyr Agored (Cymru) | Proposed Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill

Ymateb gan Valleys Regional Park | Evidence from Valleys Regional Park

Are you (your organisation) currently a provider of outdoor education?: Yes

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## **Valleys Regional Park – Response to consultation on the Development of Outdoor Education (Wales) Bill**

We in Valleys Regional Park welcome the opportunity to respond to this important consultation.

While we recognise the value in providing young people with the opportunity to experience residential outdoor education for at least one week at some stage during their school years, we strongly believe the priority should be to deliver systemic change in our approach to providing more **regular**, meaningful outdoor education in general.

In light of the declared Climate and Nature Emergencies – existential threats that demand a whole system response – increasing opportunities for young people to regularly engage with and understand their local natural environment in a range of contexts is considered vital. Even more so when the evidence shows that young people are spending less time outdoors than ever before.

### **UK children spend less time outdoors than prison inmates:**

Research carried out by Persil as part of their ‘Dirt is good’ campaign in 2016 found that children in the UK spend less time outdoors than prison inmates, with three quarters of UK children aged between 5 and 12 spending less than one hour a day playing outdoors.<sup>1</sup> This is less than the allotted ‘yard time’ for inmates of British prisons, with UN guidelines for prisoners requiring “at least one hour of suitable exercise in the open air daily”.

The survey backs up findings from other reports which showed that around a fifth of children in the UK never spend active time outdoors, and that around 12% of British children have never been to a park, forest, beach or any form of natural environment. The report has shown that only 8% of children spend time outdoors through school activities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/mar/25/three-quarters-of-uk-children-spend-less-time-outdoors-than-prison-inmates-survey>

<sup>2</sup> Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: a pilot to develop an indicator of visits to the natural environment by children - Natural England Commissioned Report NECR208

There is no reason to assume that these trends have improved since the report was published. Indeed, with the impact of covid and other factors it is more likely that the situation has further deteriorated.

### **Importance of schools in providing outdoor learning opportunities:**

The studies showed that parents realise the value of children spending time outdoors, but many feel that they don't have the adequate tools to implement this. Lack of available green space and lack of time are other reasons often cited for not encouraging more outdoor engagement.

This further highlights the importance of regular outdoor learning being embedded in the education system in which children spend the majority of their time. This could involve prioritising investment in locally accessible green space (within school grounds or the wider vicinity), providing funding for increased visits to local parks and nature reserves and funding support for locally available environmental education services and associated opportunities, such as those delivered at some Valleys Regional Park Discovery Gateway sites<sup>3</sup>.

### **Importance of outdoor education in the context of the Nature Emergency:**

*“No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced” – Sir David Attenborough*

Wales is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, leading the Welsh Government in 2021 to formally declare a Nature Emergency. A wide range of systemic solutions need to be implemented to address this enormous challenge, but the scale of the problem is such that everyone needs the awareness, understanding and motivation to be part of the solution.

A substantial number of studies point to the role of 'nature connectedness' in the development of pro-environmental behaviours. One environmental education study reported that 69% of the variance seen in the improvement in

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<sup>3</sup> (see Bryngarw Country Park <https://www.bryngarwcountrypark.co.uk/schools-and-groups/>)

environmental behaviour was explained by connectedness to nature and only 2% was explained by environmental knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Nature connection here implies regular, meaningful connection rather than one-off opportunities. Again, we feel funding priorities should be to facilitate increased opportunities for children to spend time in nature, in a range of educational contexts, on a regular basis.

### **Multiple benefits and return on investment:**

It is widely accepted among experts that spending time outdoors and engaging with nature is essential to a child's healthy physical and mental development. Facilitating nature connection as part of regular outdoor education therefore has multiple benefits beyond simply responding to the Nature Emergency and is worthy of investment for a range of reasons.

Evidence of the benefits of outdoor learning and return on investment has recently (2022) been provided by research commissioned by Natural England, which the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom has summarised in a briefing note.<sup>5</sup>

**The social return on investment in learning in natural environments was found to be £4.32 from every £1 spent.<sup>6</sup>**

### **National Nature Service for Wales and Outdoor Education:**

Valleys Regional Park along with partners including the WCVA, Natural Resources Wales, RSPB Cymry and the Food and the Farming and Countryside Commission have recently developed proposals for a National Nature Service for Wales.<sup>7</sup> Part of the purpose is to create more visible and accessible career paths into the nature sector as part of developing improved nature-based

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<sup>4</sup> Otto, S., & Pensini, P. (2017). Nature-based environmental education of children: Environmental knowledge and connectedness to nature, together, are related to ecological behaviour. *Global Environmental Change*. 47, 88–94

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.lotc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Summary-of-Evidence-LOtC-in-Natural-Environments-Nov-2022.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Social Value Business 2022. Social & economic benefits of learning in natural environments: A study of learning outside the classroom in natural environments (LINE) in primary school settings to provide a forecast of social value. NECR442. Natural England

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gwasanaethnaturcenedlaethol.cymru/>

skills, knowledge and engagement opportunities. See short video: [Valleys Regional Park and a National Nature Service for Wales - YouTube](#)

In the context of the Climate and Nature Emergencies, restoring nature and healthy functioning ecosystems is as crucial as it is urgent. It will require significant and ongoing investment, but this should also be seen as an investment in jobs.

Separate studies commissioned by the RSPB Cymru<sup>8</sup> and the Wales TUC<sup>9</sup> estimate that thousands of nature-based jobs could be created in this way, and such roles are recognised as the jobs of the future.

One of the key recommendations from the Welsh Government's recent 'Biodiversity Deep Dive' is the need to *'Build a strong foundation for future delivery (of nature recovery) through capacity building, behaviour change, awareness raising and skills development'*.

This includes *'Integrating the skills and expertise needed for nature recovery (e.g. ecologists, marine planners and biologists etc) into the Net Zero Skills Strategy'*.<sup>10</sup>

The nature sector is therefore emerging as a significant future employer offering meaningful work that delivers multiple benefits to society. However, a further study commissioned by Friends of the Earth<sup>11</sup> discovered that there is a significant 'green skills gap' limiting the potential for such job creation.

Early years, primary and secondary school education are steppingstones in a young person's journey to eventual career choices and employment. In 2021, RSPB Cymru commissioned a study which surveyed young people regarding their attitudes to pursuing careers working with nature.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Matt Rayment for RSPBCymru, 2020 'Developing a Green Workforce in Wales: Estimating the Scale of Need and Opportunity

<sup>9</sup> Transition Economics for Wales TUC, 2020 'Job Creation in Wales from a Covid Recovery Infrastructure Stimulus'

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/biodiversity-deep-dive-recommendations-html#105986>

<sup>11</sup> Transition Economics for friends of the Earth, 2020 'An Emergency Plan on Green Jobs for Young People'

<sup>12</sup> Jo McGreal and Jacky Cox Consultancy for RSPBCymru, 2021 'A National Nature Service for Wales: what good looks like' (focus was on young people aged 16-25)

Highlights from this study include that:

- Young people want to work and be recognised as having value;
- There is limited awareness among young people of the nature sector in general and they would like to know more
- This lack of awareness means the sector and the range of opportunities are not within their sphere of consideration
- This lack of awareness is also apparent in their support network (including schools) which means it is not even an aspiration

Providing regular opportunities for outdoor education – along with improved understanding of nature-based career paths and opportunities – would be a significant step forward in addressing this.

### **Recommendations:**

Valleys Regional Park does recognise the value in providing one week of residential outdoor education for young people at some stage during their school years. However, we believe that this doesn't go nearly far enough in changing our approach to outdoor education, and that more consistent and regular opportunities should be prioritised for funding in order to address the challenges and realise the benefits, only some of which are outlined above.

Facilitating increased opportunities for children to spend time in nature on a regular basis could include:

- Prioritising regular, hands-on experience of nature – both in school and utilising local green space – to increase engagement and eco-literacy
- Funded programmes for letting natural habitats flourish within school grounds
- Managing school grounds for nature by engaging local experts to advise and involving children in the management planning and delivery
- Funding for developing outdoor classrooms and learning environments
- Empowering teaching staff to deliver meaningful outdoor education experiences for their students – e.g. Cynnal Cymru's 'Nature-Wise' eco-literacy course<sup>13</sup> could be delivered to all or key teachers, support staff and school governors on a 'train the trainer' basis; local experts such as

<sup>13</sup> <https://cynnalcymru.com/nature-wise/>

- park rangers and conservation officers could be engaged to deliver similar training
- Providing funding for increased educational visits to local parks and nature reserves
  - Investing in improving the ecological condition and accessibility of local green spaces
  - Supporting associated regional organisations like Valleys Regional Park that can facilitate much of the above
  - Supporting the development of a National Nature Service for Wales
  - Taking a joined-up approach to Government policy that recognises the importance of the above in delivering wider strategic objectives (health & wellbeing, economic, environmental etc).

We would also like to submit as additional evidence the short video that illustrates some of the work involved in Valleys Regional Park which aligns with outdoor education, particularly the links with proposals for a National Nature Service for Wales - [Valleys Regional Park and a National Nature Service for Wales - YouTube](#).