

Figure 1 A visit to a wetland centre can be a springboard to further activities connecting children with nature



Generation Wild: Connecting disadvantaged children with nature through storytelling and adventure

Mark Stead from the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust reports on an exciting project it is running to connect children with nature

What is Generation Wild?

The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) is the UK's largest wetland conservation charity. Connecting people to nature has been central to our work since Sir Peter Scott founded WWT at Slimbridge in 1946 as a centre for science and conservation. Uniquely at the time, he opened it to the public so that anyone could enjoy being close to nature; an opportunity that our wetland reserves now offer thousands of people each year.

Generation Wild is WWT's free nature connection project for primary schools, children and families in economically disadvantaged areas. Aimed at children aged 5–11, the project runs across seven UK wetland centres, using free school meal data to determine eligible schools in the areas surrounding each site. Generation Wild is running across three academic years, 2021–22, 2022–23 and 2023–24, and it is envisaged that across that time, 45,000 children will have taken part.

A new approach

The project is based on the five pathways to nature connection identified by the University of Derby: contact, emotion, beauty, meaning and compassion (University of Derby, undated). Traditionally, our learning programmes have taken a largely knowledge and facts-based approach. We now believe that it is not enough to simply learn about nature. If people are to come to truly love and protect the natural world they need to experience it directly: to see, hear, smell, touch and taste it. Most importantly, they need to feel part of nature. We believe it is this approach that will improve children's wellbeing and create the next generation of nature lovers.

We also recognise that we cannot do it alone. We can create the initial spark of inspiration but it is teachers, parents and carers who will provide nature connection experiences for their children in the long term. Generation Wild therefore uses a visit to our wetland centres as a springboard to further activity back in local communities (Figure 1). It aims to show both parents and teachers that nature connection need not be difficult. You do not need

to know everything about the plants and animals you see – and you certainly do not need the latest clothes and equipment. Nature connection can be as simple as walking across a field barefoot or rolling down a hill. In fact, these experiences are often much more powerful than looking at a bird sat miles away through an expensive telescope.

How does it work?

We use a story-based approach, effectively melding the arts and the sciences and creating a sense of magic and adventure that appeals to all children. The project is based around the story of Ava the bird-girl (Figure 2). The children are first introduced to her story through an interactive digital storybook that they read together as a class. Ava starts life as an osprey. She is warned not to get too close to humans because they have become disconnected from nature. But when she sees a mysterious giant nest, the temptation is just too great. She lands on the nest and falls into a deep sleep. When Ava awakes, she has magically transformed into a part-osprey, part-human girl. However, she can't remember who she is or how she got there.

The children then visit the wetland centre where they unexpectedly stumble across Ava in life-size puppet form, asleep in her giant nest (Figure 3). She explains that she thinks the animals on site might know what has happened to her and she has made magical listening devices called 'translatorphones' that will enable the children to hear and understand what the animals are saying. She thinks the animals will be distrustful of humans at first, so the children need to complete activities to prove that they are willing to connect with nature.

The children follow a trail where they complete activities and explore some of the secrets of Ava's story. They discover that Ava's destiny is to reunite humans and the rest of the natural world. This task has been endowed on her by the 'Guardians of the Wild', a great movement of animals that works to protect the Earth and all its inhabitants. If the children connect with nature where they live, they too can become Guardians – the first human members for thousands of years. Because Ava is an osprey, she needs to migrate to West Africa. On the way, she must recruit other children as Guardians, creating a mass movement of children in support of nature.

Back at school, the children log in to our specially designed website. Here they track Ava on her journey and provide evidence of nature activities completed in their school grounds, gardens and local green spaces. Any child who completes ten activities becomes a Guardian and receives a certificate and membership badge in assembly. This element aligns strongly with the National Nature Park and Climate Leaders Awards being developed as part of the DfE *Sustainability and climate change strategy* (Department for Education, 2022). Children also have the option to return to the wetland centre for free with their family. There, they can share the wonder of Ava's



Figure 2 Ava, a part-osprey, part-human girl, demonstrating humans' connection with nature, greets children visiting a WWT centre

story with their families and show them how easy it is to connect with nature.

Why was the project developed?

At WWT, we believe that nature is for everyone, not just the privileged few. Evidence shows that children from economically disadvantaged communities have fewer opportunities to connect with nature, while potentially having the most to gain from this connection. Nature connection has been shown to improve wellbeing while developing a love and care for nature; a win-win for both children and the natural world.

What impacts has the project had so far?

During the first year of the programme, 12,500 children took part. They completed 25,000 nature activities in school grounds, gardens and local green and blue spaces. 1000 of these children went on to become Guardians of the Wild. Teachers reported a range of behaviour and wellbeing benefits experienced by the children. A big part of this was the changes they had seen in children with behavioural or emotional difficulties:

'He was one of the children with the most severe behavioural difficulties I've ever seen in 17 years ... but he would sit and he would build this bug hotel beautifully, and even make little beds to put in it, in case they wanted to go to sleep ... you know, and so for a child who is incredibly difficult ... and you know, he doesn't show emotions. Well, he's now showing a lot of empathy!'

Children also reported mental health benefits. Many children referred to moments of calm that they do not often get in their lives. Nature provided a space to escape the stresses and strains of everyday life as well as providing opportunities to slow down and reflect. It has also given the children a sense of freedom, fun and happiness and many talked about how carrying out the activities had made them feel good about themselves:

'It got my brain working, while it keeps me calm on another level, distracting me from my bad thoughts.'

'I liked how live and free I felt whilst rolling on the field.'

'It gave me a moment to just feel happy.'

'It made my heart feel good inside.'

It has helped children to appreciate the wonder and beauty of nature and provided real moments of magic, awe and wonder. Most importantly, it has made them feel part of nature where before many felt separate from it:



Figure 3 Children enjoy Ava's giant nest before setting out on the activity trail to explore the wildlife

'It was so overwhelming for me. It was magical.'

'It felt like nature is close.'

The children have come to appreciate the importance of nature and many have overcome a fear of creatures that they now love but would previously have tried to destroy.

For many children, the programme has led to a sense of kinship with nature. They have come to see other creatures and even plants as their friends. One of the activities was to make friends with a tree by experiencing it with all your senses. For some children, this tree developed a special meaning for them and a special place in their lives. It became somewhere to go when they were feeling lonely, something that was always there for them and made them feel safe.

Generation Wild runs across seven WWT wetland centres in the UK:

- Arundel Wetland Centre, West Sussex
- Castle Espie Wetland Centre, Co. Down, N. Ireland
- Llanelli Wetland Centre, Carmarthenshire, Wales
- London Wetland Centre, Barnes
- Martin Mere Wetland Centre, Lancashire
- Slimbridge Wetland Centre, Gloucestershire
- Washington Wetland Centre, Tyne and Wear

If your school would like to take part in this programme, you can see whether you are eligible and book onto it at: www.generationwild.org.uk.

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References

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