



Nature Towns and Cities



Growing up Green

Children, nature and place

25/03/2026



Housekeeping

- Please use the Q&A tab to ask questions or start a discussion topic
- If you need any support throughout the session please email info@naturetownsandcities.org.uk



1. **Welcome**
2. **Opener – Cathy Pineo** – Head of design and regenerative learning RSA
3. **Case Studies:**
 1. **Emma Tolley** – Eden Project
 2. **Izzy Reagan** – Playful Green Hull
 3. **Danni Don** – The MAXWell Community Centre and Garden
 4. **Richard Irvine and Giuliana Sinclair** – National Education Nature Park
4. **Panel discussion**
5. **Closing reflections (5 mins)**



Playful prompt

Think back to a moment you
played in nature as a child.

What were you doing?

And how did it feel?



Why play?



Children's responses when asked about play:

“It’s what I do when everyone else has stopped telling me what to do.”

“Sometimes I make stuff, sometimes I like to play games, sometimes I like messing about, sometimes I don’t like doing anything.”

What is Play? (Play Scotland, n.d)



Grownup's responses when asked about play:

“The highest form of research is essentially – play.”

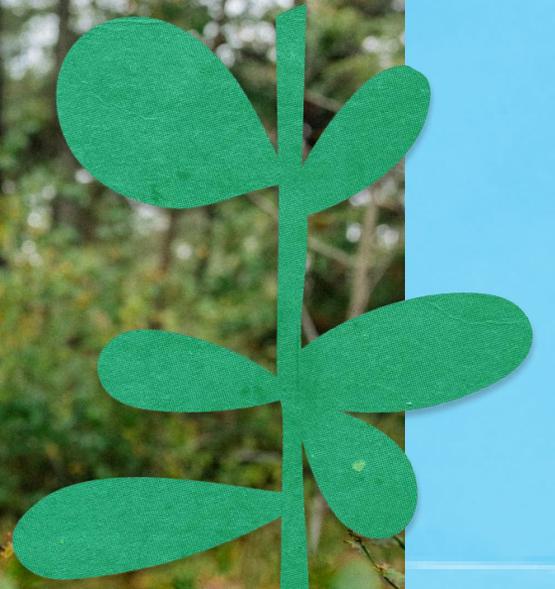
Neville Scarfe

“Play matters because people matter. It reminds us of our interdependence and gives us a chance to really see other people. And in turn, to be really and truly seen.”

Jill VIALET



Why green?



**Why
now?**





RSA X PGP

Playful Green Planet



BATH
SPA
UNIVERSITY

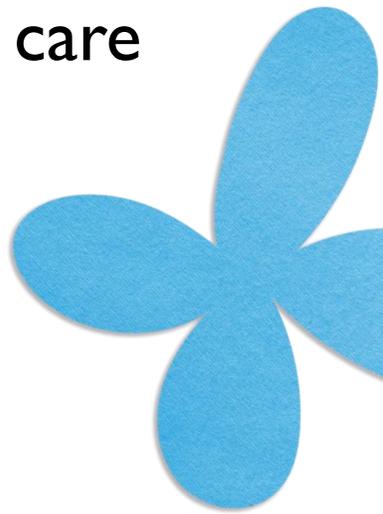
eden
project

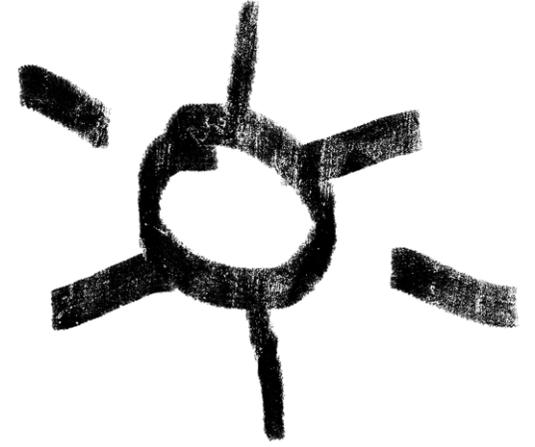
 COMMUNITY
FUND



Who we are

Playful Green Planet (PGP) is a national movement supporting children to play in, connect with, and care for nature

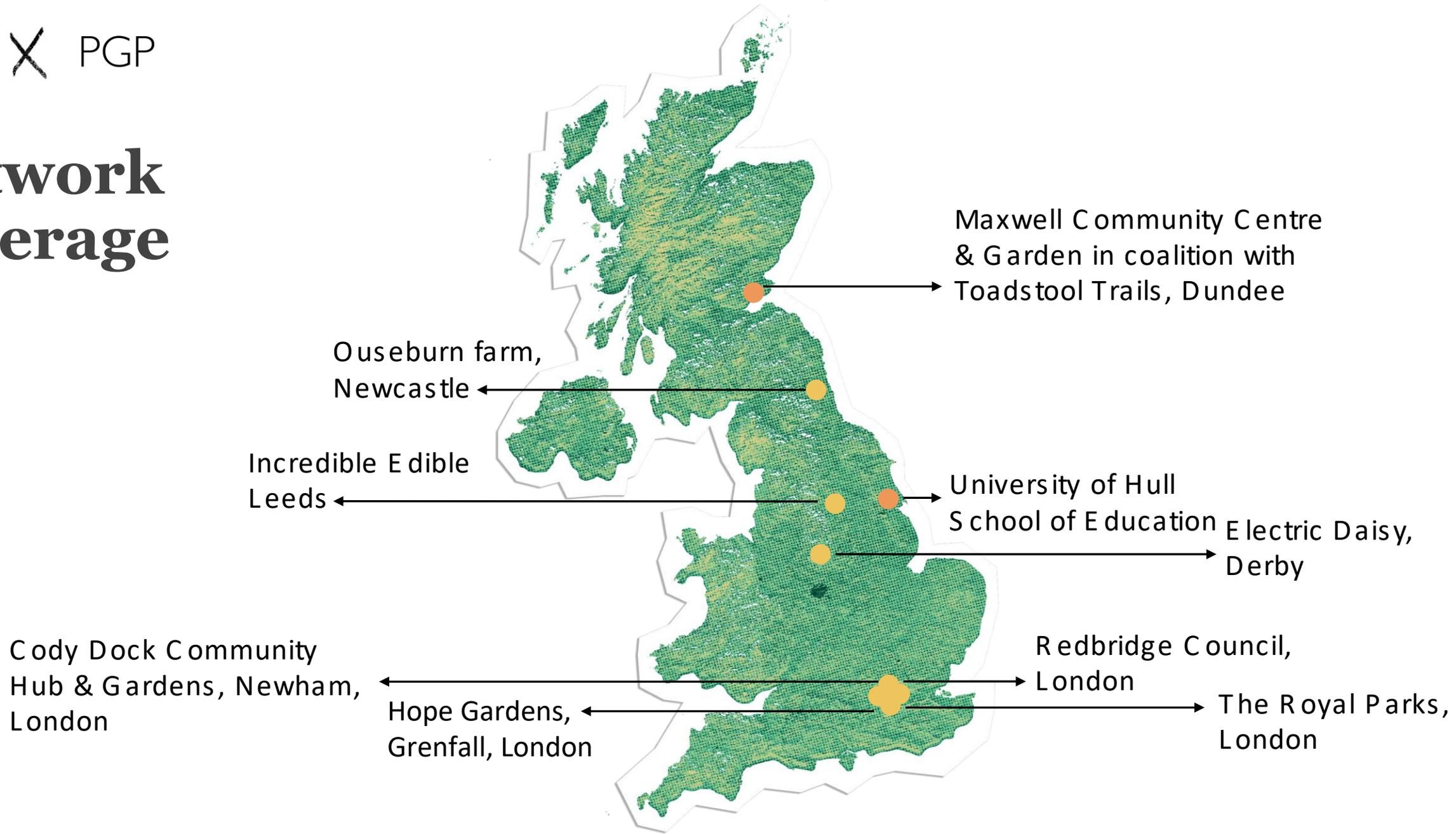




Our principles

1. **For all children:** accessible for every child for free
2. **Co-creation in place:** led by local people & strengths
3. **Nested benefits:** for children, for communities & for nature, growing citizenship, connection & regeneration
4. **Resilient:** embedded & evolving to deliver impact for the long term

Network coverage



Results

2,986

children reached

14,258

hours of nature-based
play unlocked

89

local partnerships
forged





Emma Tolley, Outreach Projects Manager

Eden Project Early Years and Nature Connections



From pit to paradise



The Challenge



1/5 children with a probable **mental disorder**



50% increase in **mental health referrals** for children and young people



Decline in school readiness:

- 1/4 do not have basic language skills
- 1/3 do not have basic communication or independence skills
- 1/4 not toilet trained



27% of children aged 2-15 classified as **overweight or obese.**



1/3 children classified as **inactive**

Benefits of nature-based play



Physical benefits

- Increased physical activity
- Improved balance and coordination
- Enhanced immunity



Active learning and autonomy

- Increased independence and resilience
- Risk management



Cognitive benefits

- Improved focus and concentration
- Problem-solving and flexible thinking



Speech and Language benefits

- Use more words



Social development

- Promotes co-operative and collaborative play



Creativity

- Symbolic play

- 91% of children agree that 'being in nature makes me happy'
- 86% of children want to do more to look after the environment

2024 Children's People and Nature Survey for England



Growing a connection to nature



Key principles:

The Nature Connections programme is evidence-based and founded upon best practices:

- Nature-based and nature-inspired
- Increased access, dedicated time and space
- Concrete and positive experiences
- Replicable
- Incorporating 'ways to wellbeing' and 'nature connection pathways'
- Facilitated and small group sessions
- Active engagement
- Person-centred, autonomy and freedom to choose
- Culture of care and reciprocity



Our environment shapes us...



*"When you reduce everything to standardised equipment and standardised spaces, you reduce the need for adaption."
Dan Edwards and Wildstrong Podcast*

Tim Gill, Urban Playground

Our environment shapes us...



Growing up Green

Children, Nature and Place

Dr Isobel Reagan

Playful
Green
Planet

Hull

The 'Nature Gap' in the Hull context

52.4% of children living in Hull experience income deprivation, a statistic which appears to be increasing rapidly (Hull City Council, 2025).

Over a third (34.7%) of children in Hull are eligible for free school meals, much higher than UK average (25.7%).

A recent report suggests that only 18% of children attending schools with a high percentage of free school meals are given daily opportunities to experience nature. A contrast to 52% of pupils attending a setting with a low percentage of free school meals (WWF Schools for Nature Report, 2024).

Hull is a densely populated city, with a tight urban grain and poor public transport connections (Hull and East Yorkshire Combined Authority).

Plant blindness – Research evidence strongly suggests that children who live in highly urbanised environments exhibit lower awareness and respect for plant life (Stagg and Dillon, 2022)



Playful Green Hull's Vision

'Rewilding' the University owned Botanic Gardens site from privately managed, publicly inaccessible gardens, to community green space which meets the needs of children and nature.

Cultivating playful interactions in our green space, drawing on the team's wealth of knowledge and experience of arts-based interventions and the forest school approach.

Facilitating co-design opportunities between children and community members to enhance the wellbeing of all who share the space (plants, animals and people!).



Coming Together and Creating Community

Building up existing networks – through our project work we have created a ‘co-design council’ consisting of wise elders from across the Hull community who offer advice, guidance and support.

Nurturing new connections – we are dedicated to ensuring our space provides opportunities for engagement with nature for children of all backgrounds and abilities. Adopting a flexible approach has supported us to invite new stakeholders onto the site, allowing us to cultivate community and reach children in new ways.

Setting the scene – we extend our work with children through providing resources and toolkits for teachers and practitioners and providing training and CPD opportunities.



“We do not inherit the world from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children” – *unknown*

A Sense of Belonging – Becoming Indigenous



“To a child, a back garden can be an unknown country.” *Robert Macfarlane*

- **Natural rhythms** – Seasons, daylight hours, migrations, flora and fauna, tide times, gestations: all offer different opportunities to connect to the present environment.
- **Practical ideas** – creating nature trails, bird watching, habitat creation, seasonal crafts, hosting events to mark equinox and solstices.
- **Stories and folklore** – retelling and reframing old narratives and making new myths tied to local landscape.
- **Practical ideas** - creating clay ‘tree spirits’, small world play with creatures/fairies in the natural environment, crafting stories around distinguishing features in the local environment, map-making, story-circles, collaborative storytelling, workshops with local theatre groups and musicians.
- **Nurturing reciprocity, challenging dominance** – reframing relationship with the natural world.
- **Practical ideas** – bug hunting and study, shelter building, spontaneous risky play and exploration, sensory experiences with mud, water and plant life, wild clay with local ceramicists.

Slowing Down and Noticing

- **Slow Pedagogy Approach** - An antidote to increasingly ‘hurried’ childhoods (Clark, 2023). Supporting children to adjust to a more mindful attitude toward time to help foster nature connection. Evidence to suggest this is also beneficial for wellbeing.
- **Nature Journaling** – A mindful and creative approach to spending time in nature. Involves careful recording of observations of the environment using words, pictures and numbers in a journal or sketchbook. Curiosity focussed activities and strategies support children’s access.
- **Research intervention** - 60 local primary school children aged 6-7, each supplied with a journal and kit, will attend a full day of nature journaling workshops at our site. Children and teachers will be supported to add to their journals regularly across the Summer term before a final co-design event including focus groups, exhibitions and presentations. Impacts on wellbeing and nature connectedness will be investigated.



“To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour”

William Blake

Current and future plans

Nature Journaling research project – commences 22nd April with regular sessions ongoing into Summer term.

Spring equinox event – 25th April. A community event to connect local families to the shifting seasons through seasonal nature craft and co-design opportunities.

Maternal mental health day picnic – 9th May. Bringing together new mothers and their infants from across Hull to enjoy wellbeing sessions, nature sensory play and outdoor feasting.

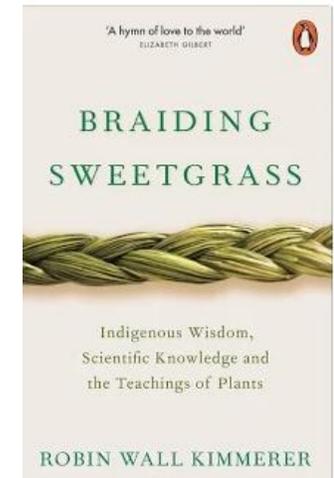
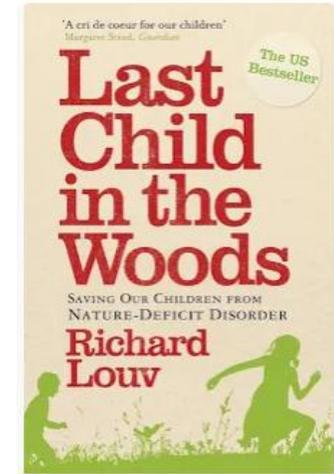
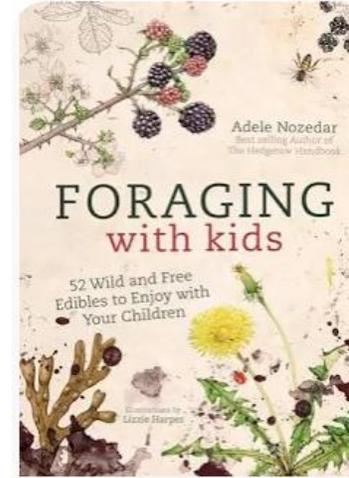


References and Recommended Reading:

Clark, A. (2023) Slow knowledge and the unhurried child: time for slow pedagogies in early childhood education. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hull City Council. (2025) *Key Facts for Hull*. Hull Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

Mist, M., 2024. *Schools for Nature: Integrating Nature into Education*, World Wide Fund for Nature (UK). United Kingdom.





the **MAXwell**
Community Centre and Garden



Danni Don - Youth Development
Worker



Connecting Children with Nature



Schools and Nurseries

- 4 local primary schools
- 3 nurseries
- Exploring and learning



After School Clubs

- 2 days a week
- 32 different children
- Outdoor play and friendships made!



Garden Club

- 4 full days of fun!
- Lunch from the garden
- Play, play and more play



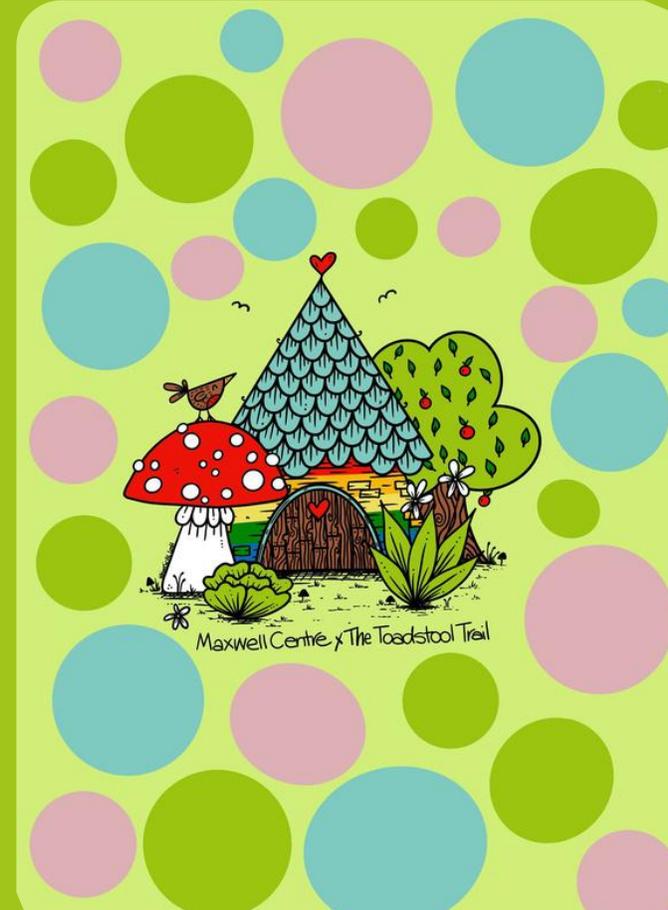
The Maxwell Way

Nature, Play and Possibilities!





Playful Green Planet



Benefits



Anxiety Reduces



Confidence Grows



Friendships form

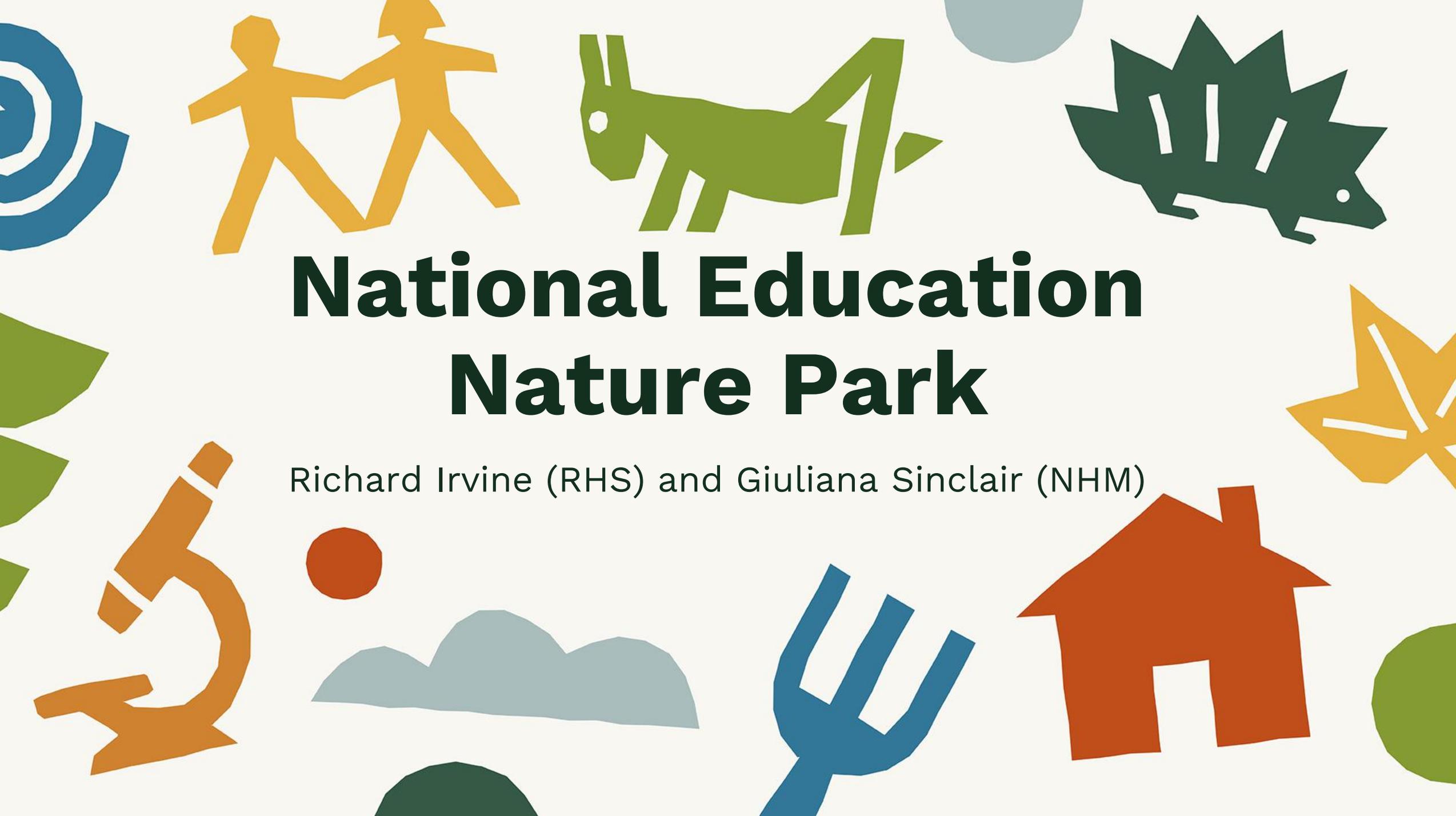


Resilience Develops

The Power of Listening!

Young people shape everything we do





National Education Nature Park

Richard Irvine (RHS) and Giuliana Sinclair (NHM)

Land use in English Schools

A survey from our partner, Learning Through Landscapes, looked at land use in UK schools

45% of school grounds in UK are man made materials such as concrete, tarmac, artificial grass etc.

38% of school grounds in UK are made up of grassland (often a sports pitch)

17% of school grounds in UK are made up of trees, shrubs, meadow, ponds and other habitats.

- Learning Through Landscapes 2023



YOUNG PEOPLE

A group of diverse young people, including children and teenagers, are gathered in a wooded area. Some are sitting on the ground with clipboards and pens, while others are standing and cheering with their arms raised. They are wearing various outdoor clothing like jackets and boots. The background shows trees and a grassy field.

Overarching goal

To empower every young person in England to take action to make a positive difference to both their own and to nature's future by:

- Developing connection to nature
- Understanding the threats it is facing
- Feeling able to do something about it

Young people are creating a network of green spaces in schools across England

Fully funded education programme for all schools, nurseries and colleges in England

Young people exploring and transforming their learning sites for people and wildlife, turning the 'grey' spaces into greener ones

- 9276 Schools and Settings registered - nearly 20%
- 22,381,012 m² of habitat mapped – 17905 Olympic swimming pools!



Education Nature Park in Exeter Nature City

- Programme Officer Ella Boston sits on accreditation application steering group
- Running vision statement workshops
- 29 out of 57 schools registered
- Ted Wragg Trust - Climate Action Planning
- Whipton Barton Infants and Juniors awarded Nature Park Grants
- Collaboration with Anna Harrison, National Trust Nature Engagement Officer



Wild Exeter – A city for people and nature

Together with our partners, Exeter City Council would like your views on nature in Exeter.



From Grey to Green



CHILTON TRINITY'S ECO-GARDEN
BLOOMS INTO A WILDLIFE HAVEN
AND STUDENT SANCTUARY



Community science in the Nature Park

Habitat mapping



Biodiversity surveys



iNaturalist



Benefits of community science

- Action on the ground at a much **faster** pace and more **local** scale than scientists alone can achieve
- **Inquiry**-based approach for learners

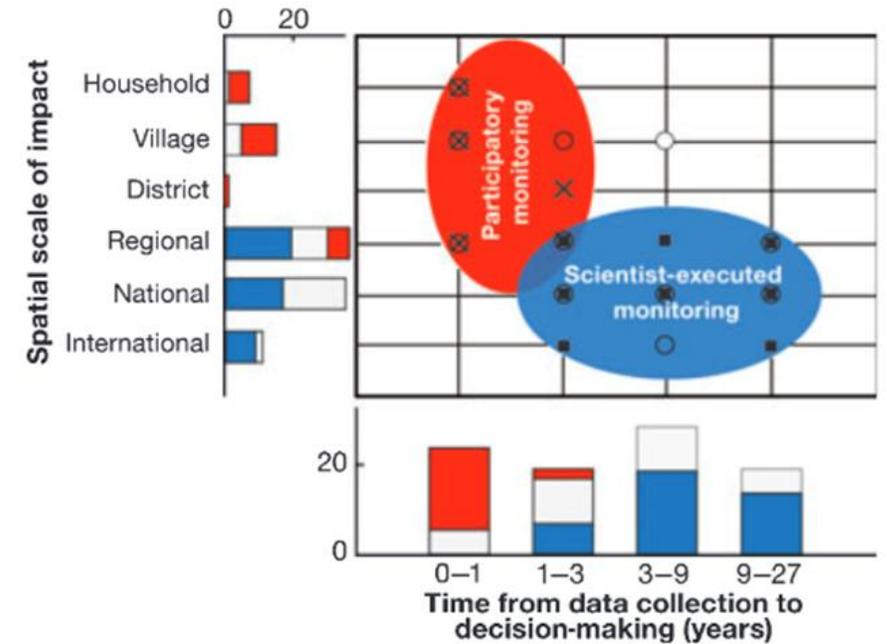
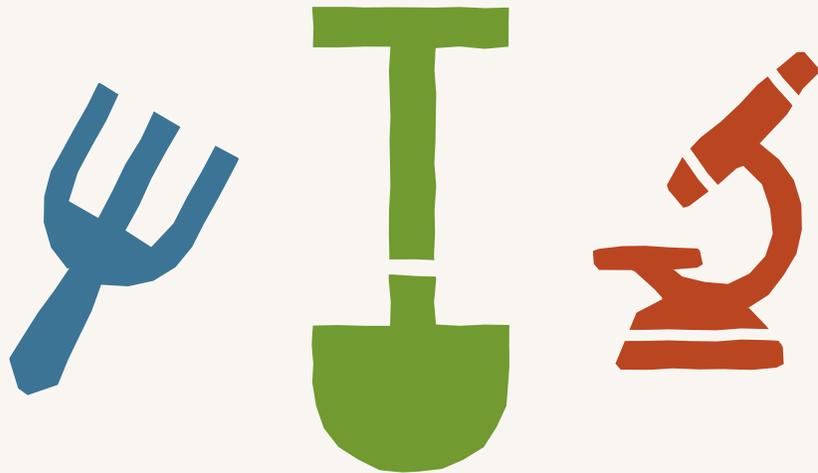
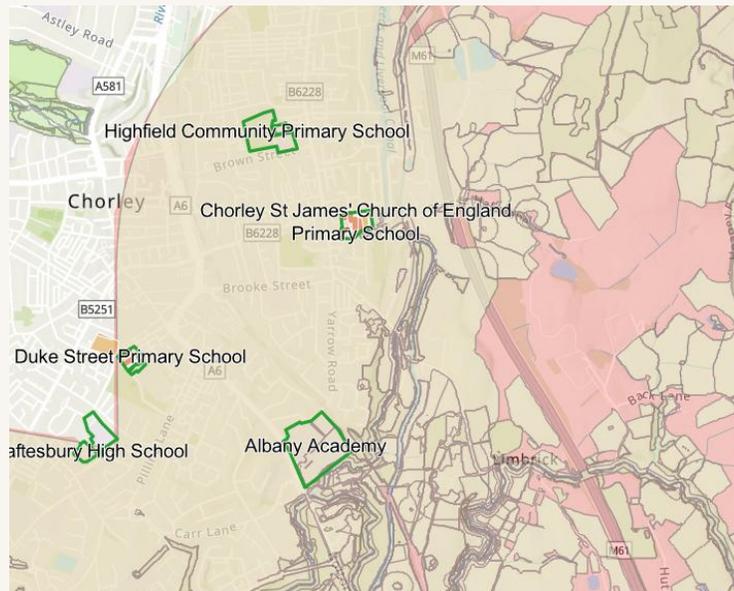


Fig. 1. Decision-making from environmental monitoring, based on data from published monitoring schemes 1989–2009 ($n = 104$). ■, scientist-executed monitoring schemes ($n = 45$); ○, monitoring schemes with local data collectors ($n = 37$); and ×, participatory monitoring schemes ($n = 22$). The circles comprise all the scientist-executed (blue) and all the participatory monitoring schemes (red). The bar chart indicates the number of scientist-executed monitoring schemes (blue bars), monitoring schemes with local data collectors (white bars) and participatory monitoring schemes (red bars) at each level of spatial scale and implementation time.

Making a difference with community science

- Filling in the holes in the map with schools' data
- Linking with Local Nature Recovery Strategy
- Track the difference being made!



Making a difference with community science

- Take a No Mow May approach, do the Grassland Plant Survey before and after
→ one school counted **x3** the number of species after!
- Counting pollinators in two areas, and think about connecting them with a pollinator corridor
- Young people are using evidence to make decisions and demonstrate impact



Conclusion

- Spending time outdoors can be channelled into action for nature
- Empowering young people to be agents of change by understanding what's there, taking evidence-based decisions and seeing change happen!





Thank you!



National Education Nature Park

hello@educationnaturepark.org.uk

Led by



With



Working with



Commissioned by



Partners

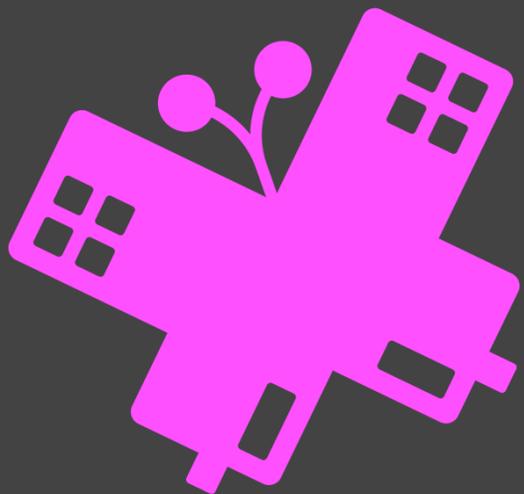


THE
ROYAL
SOCIETY

Panel discussion

Please use the Q&A tab to ask a question





thank you

