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The Children's Forest – Planting a Vision

Jim Hindle introduces a new initiative that inspires the next generation to take a practical environmental role and harness the power of the imagination

It seems there's never been a better time to plant trees. As the realities of the climate crisis become more undeniable by the day, efforts to mitigate its effects only grow ever more urgent. The crisis plays upon all of our minds, not least those of the children who, untrammelled by the myriad distractions and seeming justifications of work and the adult world, see the problem all the clearer. But not all children are old enough, or of a disposition to join school climate strikes let alone begin to grapple with the complexities that should be occupying all our minds. It's vital they are given active roles to help tackle the crisis. And tree planting fits this bill ideally.

That is the thinking behind a new initiative affiliated with the Forest School Association. 'The Children's Forest' project seeks to give children an opportunity to plant trees and tend

them in future, offering a sanctuary for both those planting themselves and the children of all species. Positive envisioning is key to the scheme. As part of the initiative, children are given the opportunity to play in and observe existing woods around them, really coming to experience the outdoor world in all its depth and beauty. From there they are encouraged to form an inner picture of woodland in their imaginations, to picture woodland in all its richness that they can then utilise to inform their vision of the future forests they will help create. They then bring it to life with art, poetry, writing and theatre. The actual planting and tending, with an emphasis to also restore and protect existing forests, follows on from these key creative processes; what has already taken shape in the mind's eye given added impetus on its path towards physical embodiment.

Growing up as Protectors

The benefits for children in all of this are numerous. The Children's Forest gives a structured means by which children of all ages can engage with engendering hope and creating a better future in a very tangible way. It roots them in the reality of living woodland and gives them a clear stewardship role, empowering them to grow up with a perspective and identity of caretakers and protectors. It also gives them the mindset of respect for all species, be they animal, plant or those of the trees themselves.

The initiative gives children the opportunity to come together in their role as creators and protectors, not just with their immediate peers but with those of all ages and backgrounds and as part of a global network, working together with a unified vision and goal. In the same way it also

Children's Forest



CENTRE Lanercost School tree planting day

LEFT Planting the first tree

BELOW Imagining the Future Forests – painting with natural pigments



gives landowners and Forest School practitioners opportunities to meet and work together as it does for any others wishing to be affiliated with the project; helping young and old alike improve their 'social capital'. And it gives everyone the chance to learn about and build relationships with those other cultures; those of the trees themselves and the myriad of creatures they support.

A report by English Nature; 'Nature and psychological well-being',¹ helps confirm what we may already feel about spending time outdoors. Indicators of mental well-being such as trust, tolerance, participation and feelings of safety are boosted by less stressful environmental factors. In an article entitled 'Are cities bad for your mental health?' for *Psychological Medicine* in 1994, Glyn Lewis and Margaret Booth state that mental disorder is far less prevalent among those in urban areas with access to gardens or green spaces than those without.² Just as levels of mental disequilibrium are lower in children and young adults living in rural areas as opposed to urban ones, we can only

extrapolate the benefits for all children of spending time in the woods; and not only 'passively' appreciating them but playing an active role in their welfare. For example, Dr. Roger Ulrich of Sweden's University of Technology cites immediate psychological benefits derived from contact with Nature³ just as Professors Rachel and Stephen Kaplan in 'The Experience of Nature: a psychological perspective'⁴ and 'The restorative effects of Nature: towards an integrative framework'⁵ helped show that time outdoors helps with 'attention restoration'.

It takes on an added dimension, of course, with the state of the climate. A report by The Health Education Authority in 1997 states that positive mental health helps us endure pain and sadness. It also affects our ability to deal with change, transition and life events. Time spent in Nature and caring for it help all of us deal with new horizons, just as the psychological benefits of engaging to pragmatically address any issue, rather than simply worrying about it, are well attested by anyone involved in engendering practical change.

Duty to Future Generations

As with other efforts to improve the wider psychological health of our societies, prevention of problems is better than their cure. Time spent in the woods, and actively helping address the environmental crisis, can be seen as a collective 'immunisation', helping to propagate positive mindsets. If we are serious about continuing to engage with the climate crisis and going forward as part of a robust and healthy culture, we need such inoculations as much as ever. Picking up the pieces further down the line is at best a false economy and a dereliction of duty to future generations, just as Iroquois culture so famously calls us to consider the impacts on our actions on the 'seventh generation' down the line.

Perhaps the initiative's emphasis of 'positive envisioning' holds more potential than might at first appear. As the great writer on traditional culture R.J. Stewart reminds us, we have imagined our way into the ecological crisis, changing the reality of the perfect planet into one shaped by our own minds. Centuries of pollution and denigration took their root first and foremost in a shift in consciousness, from the conception that ourselves and the land are separate entities. Just as they are responsible for our collective plight today, our minds may also be able to help steer us towards a better future, informed by a vision of a restored world, rich in everything it once was and could still be. Perhaps, first and foremost, we have to be willing to simply imagine potential. Realising it remains the true task of our time.

For further information on The Children's Forest visit:
www.childrensforests.org

- ¹ 'Nature and psychological well-being.' English Nature Research Reports, 2003.
- ² 'Are cities bad for your mental health?' *Psychological Medicine*, 24: 913-915. LEWIS G. & BOOTH, M., 1994
- ³ 'Visual landscapes and psychological well being.' *Landscape Research*, 4: 17-23. ULRICH, R.S. 1979.
- ⁴ 'Aesthetic and affective response to natural environment.' In: Altman I & Wohlwill, J.F. (eds) *Human Behaviour and Environment: advances in theory and research*. Vol 6 Behaviour and the Natural Environment. New York: Plenum Press. ULRICH, R.S., 1983.



Children's Forest

An invitation to become a Children's Forest facilitator

For children to imagine, plant and tend protected forests; creating sanctuaries for future generations of children of all species

Who is this for?	What is the course?	Who are we?
This course is for forest school facilitators, nature mentors and outdoor educators who work with children. It offers an opportunity to deepen and broaden your practice, and gives the skills and knowledge to plant Children's Forests with your groups.	Over the five days you will be guided through the four-step journey of Experiencing, Imagining, Planting and Tending Children's Forests. Our aim is to support you to engage children as restorers and caretakers of their world.	We are an experienced team comprising of Forest School practitioners and trainers Jon Cree and Anna Richardson, permaculture teacher Pippa Johns, and Edward Ord-Clarke, Arborist and environmental educator. We look forward to sharing our passion and knowledge with you.

17-19th Sept & 16-17th Oct, arrival the evening before
Cost: £600 for 5 days and 5 nights
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Interested to hear more, get in touch:
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