

Building in inclusion

Project manager Charlotte Levene on building access & inclusion into the WWT's newest nature connection project



WWT's learning programme runs across 10 wetland sites, welcoming over 40,000 learners per year. Their new project **Generation Wild** aims to ensure that schools and families from economically disadvantaged backgrounds have access to nature. The project is offered to schools with a high % of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM).

Generation Wild is based on the story of Ava the osprey

One day Ava the osprey lands on a giant nest. She magically transforms into part bird, part girl.

Children are introduced to Ava through a digital storybook in school before their visit.

On their visit to the wetland centre they discover her giant nest and meet her in life-size puppet form. Through listening to the animals at the wetlands, they discover that Ava's parents have gone on a long journey called a migration, all the way to West Africa. If she is to find them, she must do the same.

Back at home and at school, children, their teachers and their families log into a specially-designed website. They follow Ava on her journey through a series of audio blog posts. They see her reunited with her family and being introduced to the Guardians of the Wild, a great council of animals that protect the earth and everything that lives here. They promise that any child willing to care for and connect with nature can themselves become a Guardian of the Wild; the very first humans allowed to join this group.

Children complete nature connection activities, earning virtual badges and, when ten are collected, become Guardians of the Wild, receiving a certificate and pin-badge in assembly. This helps inspire others to do the same, helping to create the next generation of nature lovers.

How does this project overcome barriers and promote inclusion?

Storytelling approach

Children learn and engage in lots of different ways. Generation Wild brought together specialists from the worlds of theatre, technology, education, children's mental health and wildlife to develop a unique project that works for all children. The approach seeks to veer away from the "telling about nature" model and tap into children's love for stories and natural curiosity.

Children are sent out across the wetlands to discover some of Ava the osprey's secrets. They are encouraged to run and see what they can find rather than listen and follow the adults. Children are able to engage with Generation Wild in different ways - they can watch a puppet show, follow a trail, listen to the voices of animals, complete nature activities and follow Ava's journey on a website.

Nature Connection

Sitting and learning is difficult for lots of us, especially children. Nature connection activities allow children to use their senses and creativity to realise that they are part of the natural world - that it isn't about them and us.



Something for everyone

Everyone enjoys experiencing nature in different ways. Some like to simply sit quietly to listen and observe. Others prefer to be more active. Some wish to get creative, some want to see the wildlife. We have categorised our nature activities so that when people find the type of activities they can enjoy they can easily find others that they're likely to enjoy in the same way.

No equipment necessary

The project suggests over 50 nature connection activities for children and families. We have tried to ensure that no equipment is needed for these so that any child can do lots, simply by going outside. Most can be done any time of the year and lots are very easy to achieve. This isn't about challenging children; it's about enabling them to have as many enjoyable nature experiences as possible.



Money

The project is completely free for eligible schools (calculated using FSM data), with each family involved entitled to a free visit to one of our wetland centres.

Building resilience

For many of us, the last couple of years have been especially tricky. Lockdowns have limited our movement and freedom, and it has been a scary time for adults and children. When we look at how people cope when things are particularly tough, being outside and surrounded by nature is often a key factor in building resilience, or coping when things are difficult.

What we know about resilience is, if we make one "resilient move" it has a knock-on effect and lots more positive things take place. Being outside gives us space and freedom. It allows time away from screens, potentially somewhere quieter or with just natural sounds. The more time we spend being outside and connecting with nature, the more we feel like this space is for us and that we belong. That sense of belonging is really key to our wellbeing. Learning that we can engage with nature and doing more of it feeds into our self-esteem and sense of achieving. The benefits go on and on.

Developing an inclusive project - what to consider

- **Representation Matters!** If we never see people who look like us we may not feel welcome. Consider how we can make spaces feel welcome for all.
- **Equipment.** Offer as many activities as possible that don't need any specialist equipment. Binoculars, bat detectors, magnifying glasses are all great, but many people don't have access to these. Suggest activities that don't need anything at all - just an opportunity to be outside and become part of the natural world.
- **Outside anywhere.** Show how children can connect with nature in the smallest of outdoor spaces. Wildlife photos of swooping landscapes are glorious but photos of children playing in a local park or grass on a housing estate may feel more familiar to lots of children.
- **What's allowed?** For lots of people, nature reserves and wildlife centres come with rules and people are scared to get things wrong. Make it clear what people are allowed to do. Tell them where they can touch things. Tell them if they need to be quiet, and tell them where they can make lots of noise. No-one likes to get told off - make it clear and make it friendly!
- **Ask the experts.** Often we are scared to ask about nature as we don't want to look stupid! I couldn't tell an egret from an eagle until I asked one of the people with a telescope in one of our hides. But I was nervous and felt that I should know more. I was delighted that they wanted to share their knowledge with me and recognised what a great idea it is to have "Guides in the Hides". If you have experts on site, think about how they could pro-actively tell people about nature. It might be that they wear an "Ask Me About Nature!" badge, or they welcome people and invite them to look through their telescopes.
- **Ask the children!** Find out what they like best and what they don't like. Find out what they wish they could do more of. We can guess what is working for children but when we ask them, we are often surprised. Think about how to include a participation or co-production element to your project. How do we know it's working if we don't check in with those it was designed for?

Click here for more on [Generation Wild](#)



Generation Wild was created in partnership with [Stand & Stare](#)