

Engaging Audiences with Protected Areas

An Activities Toolkit



Compiled by Matthew Ross, Peak District National Park.



This toolkit is intended as a sampler, containing ten “top tips” for engaging young people. It’s probably most useful as an overview for those just starting to do more engagement, or would like to know more. It contains some tried and tested ideas that I (and many others!) have used, including some great ideas I witnessed during my study visits to Duna-Ipoly Nemzeti Park and Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park. Many are inspired by Forest schools activities while others are more scientific. Some of these ideas were new to me; if you’re already an experienced outdoor educator, perhaps there might be something that is new to you, too.

So, on to our top tips...!

1 Close Connection with Nature

The closer young people can get to living things, the better. These do not have to be big creatures, but given the right build-up, the smallest creature or plant is exciting! Giving the children dedicated time and space to find creatures or plants for themselves and observe them carefully is a very effective method. The search for creatures becomes a kind of treasure hunt; if the creatures are seen as treasure, then already they have acquired a value in the learners’ minds. Viewing them close up enables us to appreciate their special qualities and often amazing adaptations – it is then much easier to convey the importance of conserving them.

Examples could include bug hunting, pond dipping, or plant surveys

It's important to include care messages about handling living things gently, and to return them to where you found them. Creating a score system for the different creatures, or even a ‘Top Trumps’ type game, can help make it more fun and seem like more of a treasure hunt. Using hand-held microscopes or visualisers adds another layer of excitement!



Using Flow Learning



The idea of energy flows and “flow learning” can be very helpful for structuring sessions. It helps to ensure that you capitalise on the children’s natural energy and excitement at the beginning of a session, before developing into activities that give them a deeper connection with nature, and allow reflection time at the end of the session. Children from urban areas who may not usually access the countryside may be very excited at first, and need to burn off some energy before they can have a deeper, more focused connection with nature. At the other end of the spectrum, they may be very cautious in getting involved; I have known many children who do not even want to sit on the grass, initially. Beginning with a fun game to awaken enthusiasm, and then gradually focusing in attention and allowing the children to build to deeper, more sustained connection can really enhance the impact of sessions. Here’s a more detailed breakdown of flow learning stages:

Flow stage	Details
AWAKEN ENTHUSIASM	<p>Harness the excitement that the children have when going outside; don’t be afraid to let them burn off some energy before getting down to business!</p> <p>Warm-up games get the children moving about and exploring (it’s important to include clear boundaries in the area being used at this point).</p>
FOCUS ATTENTION	<p>After creating the initial burst of energy, begin to bring enthusiasm down to a clear focus. This might be an activity that introduces a theme, and will be a little more directed. Ideally this should be a calming moment that helps the participants “get their eye in” to nature.</p>
DIRECT EXPERIENCE	<p>This should form the bulk of a session.</p> <p>Directly use the outdoor environment to give students a deeper understanding; when possible, leave them to their own devices to explore and make their own discoveries. For Forest School, this would probably take the form of play or exploratory activities</p> <p>For instance, beginning a science topic on plants studying plants in the school grounds. Station yourself with some ‘tools’ – perhaps ID sheets, paper & pencils, books etc, but leave the children free to decide how and where they use them.</p>
SHARE INSPIRATION	<p>Time for reflection, and to share what has been discovered and made. This might be time to share dens children have made, or continuing the plants example, sharing what they have discovered about the plants in the school grounds – species identified, drawings etc. This solidifies and clarifies the</p>



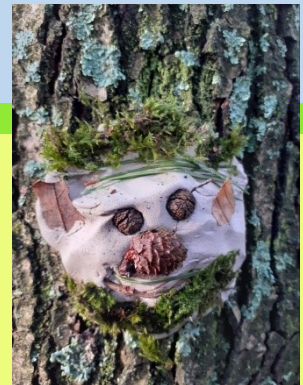
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Giving Nature Character



To bring nature to life, especially for younger children, helps to inspire a connection. Can we personify creatures to make them seem fun and exciting? Having animal puppets to help tell the story of our environment can be a great way to do this. Puppets and soft toys for many types of animals are readily available as a resource. Hungary's Duna-Ipoly NP has even had bespoke characters, puppets and mascots designed for their key species, like the Longhorn beetle!

As an activity, using clay or mud and foraged natural materials to create their own animal, bird or insect characters is a fantastic way for learners to forge bonds with species. They could even create their own fantasy creatures that are adapted to live in the habitat.



CLAY CREATURES

You will need:

Some clay (or you could use mud)

Foraged natural materials

What to do:

After studying real creatures, give the group a chance to make a model of one, using clay (or mud) for a body. They could design their own creature with some crazy adaptations! When using natural materials, it's important to set some ground rules on what is ok to collect, eg. "sticks, leaves and pine cones are ok, but don't pick wildflowers".

Make time for them to share their creatures with others.

Extension activities might include making up stories, building suitable homes for them, or creating food chains using them.

TREE SPRITES is a variation on this activity. It is less science focused, and adds an element of magic and storytelling. Participants do not have to create a model of an existing creature, they can create their own 'tree sprite' or 'tree monster' (clay attached to a tree) that can take on any form. Either way, the forage for natural materials will help them explore the space and connect to nature.

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Games to Teach Environmental Concepts

Games are great for harnessing energy levels at the beginning of a session, and also for helping to bring environmental issues or scientific principles to life.

Modified 'tag' games are good for many things. You could have predator-prey tag games, or Litterbugs vs Rangers, for instance!

CAMOUFLAGE GAME

You will need:

Pipe cleaners of different colours, to represent caterpillars

Before the group arrive, hide the "caterpillars" in a small area. Remember to count them out, so you can find them all again later! Then, instruct the group to see how many they can find. You could let everyone do this at once, or in teams as a relay race if you want a faster-paced activity.

Once the hunt is over, examine the colours we found. Which were the easiest to find? Green, brown and black are hardest to find as they are camouflaged well, but pink, blue and red caterpillars are easy to find. You can link this to camouflage and evolution principles as a learning point.

There are loads of variations you can do based around this. Peppered moths are a classic example, and as part of a climate change programme, I have used mountain hares in their white winter plumage – they are much easier to see when there is no snow on the ground. This is also a really good activity for focusing attention as it enquires careful searching and "getting one's eye in". It's a good precursor to a bug hunt.



HABITAT LOSS GAME

A bit like the party game 'Musical Chairs'. Start out with several different hoops each representing a habitat (depending on your environment they could be trees, ponds, meadows, lily-pads, whatever!). Tell the group that each habitat can only support a certain number of creatures, eg three per hoop.

The game begins. The group each pretend to be a creature, and move around the space like that creature. When you call out "HABITATS!", all creatures must find a home. Any creatures that cannot find a space become extinct. Then, introduce different variables that gradually remove habitats (fire, human interference, pollution, etc). Each time a habitat is lost, there are less spaces, and more creatures become extinct. Continue until the impacts of habitat loss can really be seen!

It's good to include positive messages about how we can help reduce habitat loss, so the game isn't too negative!





Explore in a Playful Way

Giving the learners time to explore the area helps them find their own connection to nature. Encouraging them to take part in some loose, play-based activities can give some structure and aid their focus. Here are a few examples:

FIND FIVE

You will need: A cloth, Five foraged items.

What to do:

Collect five interest items from around the area you are working in (try to pick five that are not unique or very hard to find!) Cover them with a cloth, and then gather your group around. Allow them a sneaky peek at the items for only ten seconds. Can they memorise them and then find their own five items that very closely match yours?

This is a great activity to get them exploring, and there are endless variations – you can make it as hard or as difficult as you like, eg, “find any leaf”, or “find an oak leaf like this one, that is more than one colour”.

MEET A TREE

You will need: An area with trees; some blindfolds

Participants pair up, and one in each pair puts on a blindfold. Explain that their partner is going to choose a mystery tree and guide them to it. (Model how to guide somebody safely and carefully!). The guide spins the blindfold wearer gently round so they do not know which way they are going, and then leads them to “meet” a tree. The blindfold-wearer must get to know the tree very well, by feeling it up and down, wrapping their arms around it, feeling for moss and describing it, etc. When they think they have gathered enough information, their partner leads them back to the start. When the blindfold is removed, can they find their tree again using the same senses?

SKYWALK or EYES IN THE SKY

You will need:

An area with trees

Some small, lightweight mirrors

A similar activity, again with partners and one guide. This time, the person being guided puts a flat mirror beneath their nose and looks down into it, so they can see up into the trees, and imagine what it is like being a bird or a squirrel up high! The guide takes them for a walk around the forest; can they describe what it is like?



6 Embrace Arts as well as Science

It's easy for us to always approach our protected areas from a scientific perspective, but not all people initially engage this way. We should try to embrace different approaches from a variety of disciplines, so that we can inspire people with many different mindsets. Art and music, for instance. Bringing in specialists can open our eyes to new activities that work really well, and bring in new audiences. Here are a few ideas for starters:

NATURAL ART & SCULPTURE

Inspired by nature artists like [Richard Shilling](#) and, Richard Long, Chris Drury and Andy Goldsworthy, we can make fantastic art and sculpture using pebbles, leaves, sticks and mud!

You will need;

Some photos of artwork for inspiration

Plenty of natural materials

Some examples of artists inspired by nature can be found here: [9 Amazing Artists to Inspire Nature-Related Art Projects - The Art of Education University](#)



LANDSCAPE ART

You will need:

Simple frames (could be cardboard)

Paper & pencils, or acetate sheets and pens.

Give participants their own frame, and let them use it to frame their own favourite part of the landscape. They could then try and draw it. While the thought of drawing can be off-putting to those who don't see themselves as artistic, the Loch Lomond NP team have created a twist to make it easier: a sheet of acetate is fixed to the frame, enabling the artist to simply draw over the lines they see with pen, rather than creating a picture from scratch.

LUMENOGRAPHY

This one is a bit more technical, but a fantastic, creative way of making art from nature! Lumeonography is a forerunner of modern photographic processes, made popular in the 1840s by pioneer photographer Anna Atkin. It involves making shadow prints on UV-sensitive materials using sunlight.

You will need:

Photo paper, or dedicated cyanograph paper/fabric (one commercial example is sunography);

Some interesting natural materials; a sunny day!

Instructions vary depending on what materials you use, but essentially it's a case of choosing some natural objects with interesting shapes, then placing them on your photosensitive material. Leave in strong sunlight for around five minutes, and then see what image has formed! Remember to keep your photosensitive materials in a dark container until you are ready to use them.



Create Mindful Space



Building space within our educational programmes for learners to explore and find their own connections to nature is very important. It's tempting to fill the days with activities and information, but for the deepest connections we must allow learners to have their own special moments.

MAGIC SPOT is a good way of doing this. All you need to do is let your group spread out and each find their own special place within the outdoor area. Once they are there, everybody goes quiet and has time to simply be in the space. You could encourage them to focus on the view, listen to sounds, or even close their eyes. Using hammocks is great for giving this moment of blissful quiet and deep connection too!

Many of the activities I've included in this sampler, especially the more immersive ones, are not just suitable for young people. Presented to adults in an age-appropriate way, they can present absorbing, mindful activities for people of all ages. The benefits of "forest school for adults" are beginning to be realised and offer a useful way to promote green wellbeing.



Experiment with Incorporating Technology

How do we engage those teenagers glued to their phones? We may well think of being connected to nature as being mutually exclusive to technology, but it can be useful. Particularly for young, urban audiences, it may be a bit of a leap to completely remove themselves away from the technology they are used to. So, we can meet them halfway and use technology to hook them in. The [iNaturalist](#) and [Seek](#) apps are great tools to help with ID skills, and can enhance a nature walk or bug hunt. In U.K. National Parks, the 'Look Wild' project encourages use of these to promote citizen science and nature-connectedness.

Similarly, QR code scavenger hunts around a nature reserve or geocaching are great ways to get young people exploring. Or what about nature-inspired podcasting? It's a more big-budget solution, but some national parks, like Duna-Ipoly NP, have even introduced their own apps. The Duna-Ipoly app mixes sought-after directions for popular hikes with information about the national park and its wildlife; it's a great way to engage casual visitors with our messages, and the special qualities of our landscapes.

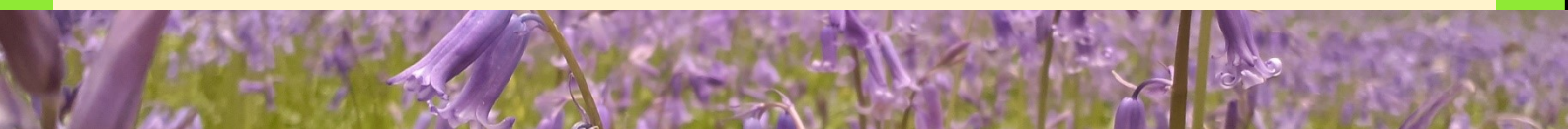
SNAPSHOT SNAP

You will need:

phones or iPads

What to do:

In pairs or small groups, one person uses their phone to take a picture of a natural object. The rest of the group have to go and find where it is, and take an identical photo. You could then use iNaturalist or Seek to identify it.



Practical Conservation Challenges

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Practical conservation skills give participants chance to “give back” to nature. Tasks that require tools build life skills in tool use and managing risk.

Removing invasive species like Himalayan balsam is a particularly useful skill, as it is something that participants can learn to do elsewhere. Balsam pulling is great with young groups as it requires no tools, little strength and produces very visible results quite quickly.

Tasks like this can be a bit monotonous after a while, so setting a time limit – a ten minute challenge, for instance, or setting up teams—can keep participants focused and engaged.

10 Sharing is Important!

Using flow learning principles incorporates space for learners to share things they have create, or share their reflections on the session.

Sharing beyond the group itself is also very important

Loch Lomond & The Trossachs NP have displays in their visitor centre, highlighting the work done by local children tree-planting, including photos and written work by the children on why this is important. This is likely to encourage children to bring their families to see their work, increasing our engagement reach. It can also inspire others to take positive action! Promoting and sharing work that combats problematic issues, eg littering, can also help reduce these issues.

The best nature connection can often begin at or near home. Providing activities that participants can repeat on their own at home (or that we can run in their local green spaces) can provide a gateway to longer-term connection to nature, and may inspire them to visit our protected areas.

