

Scottish Natural Heritage

Teaching in Nature

Blawhorn Moss National Nature Reserve

Blawhorn Moss National Nature Reserve (NNR) is a rare survivor of the raised and blanket peat bogs which once covered much of Central Scotland. This little oasis is conveniently located, half way along the railway that runs between Edinburgh and Glasgow, making it one of Scotland's most accessible NNRs. Never-the-less, few schools use this fantastic resource on a regular basis and the Reserve Manager looked to the Teaching in Nature project to see if he could change this.

Two teachers from Murrayfield Primary and 3 from Toronto Primary, both West Lothian, visited Blawhorn Moss with their class as part of their Teaching in Nature professional development (Toronto visiting twice). The reserve manager's main role was to introduce the group of teachers to the site as part of their collaborative planning visit and answer any questions they had about taking pupils there. This day was extremely cold and some of the teachers were concerned that the children would think 'there's nothing there!'. One teacher, having grown up in the area however, couldn't wait for the opportunity to share 'her' site with her pupils.

In the pupil visits the teachers devised, the classes, from P3-7, explored the wildlife and habitats of Blawhorn, getting hands on, e.g. via pond dipping, and using various forms of photography. Despite the concerns of some of the teachers, the pupils fully engaged with learning at Blawhorn. Spring was particularly captivating, with butterflies frequently landing on the children. One child remarked "The moss is magical with all that cotton [grass]; it's so soft to touch, it's like fairies dancing!"

The P7s created a nature trail for other classes to follow, the P4s gathered natural materials to paint with and create natural art. The P3s used an 'Outdoor Journeys' approach, building on the work they had been doing in their local area, and the P5s did some kite photography.

A range of post-visit projects ensued, including persuasive writing and debate on the impact of the proposed wind farm on the NNR; creating sculptures inspired by the art around the board walk; using their photographs to annotate maps; and constructing model wind turbines. The kite photography led to a technology task designing and making



"I thoroughly enjoyed my experience and am no longer afraid to visit or plan trips to nature sites. The children I am currently teaching visited Blawhorn during P6 and still talk about how much they enjoyed it and are keen to go again."



kites—and one of their photos won 1st prize in their local Archaeological Trust competition and was made into postage stamps.

One year on, none of the 5 teachers had returned to the NNR with their pupils, all citing travel costs as the barrier. However, 2 of the teachers had taken their pupils on residential trips and 1, now teaching P1/2, had made regular trips to a local woodland, planning and making these with his stage partner (P2).

Most teachers (3) say they now feel more able, when taking learning outdoors, to adapt their plans according to things that happen on the day and are less worried about planning for set Experiences and Outcomes. Three also say they are more confident about justifying and pushing for outdoor learning. Two say they now plan for a wider range of curricular areas outdoors and collaborate with colleagues when planning visits, where they may not have done previously.

All the teachers also felt that Teaching in Nature had changed the way they teach indoors, in one way or another. Two found, for example, that they now set more outdoor homework, two were more confident to follow through with learning opportunities brought in from the outdoors by pupils and two found that, having seen certain children working outdoors, they were more able to meet their needs in the classroom.

The site manager remains keen to work more with schools, highlighting the potential of the reserve for a wide range of learning, as well as its relative ease of access. He has developed a resource [“Peatlands—a guide to educational activities for schools”](#)

[Teaching in Nature](#) combines a collaborative and practical approach to professional development in outdoor learning. It supports groups of teachers to work together to use a nearby place that is special for nature to plan, implement and evaluate challenging and fun outdoor learning experiences for their pupils. An evaluation of the 2012/13 Teaching in Nature project found that 80% of respondents had continued to take learning outdoors in the year that followed and 73% had supported a colleague to take their class outdoors.

If you'd like more information on *Teaching in Nature* or advice on how to use the approach in your context, contact:

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“I thoroughly enjoyed the Teaching in Nature project at Blawhorn Moss... it’s a super area and lends itself to so many positive experiences”

