Lucy and Lana, Geography teachers from Stirling High School, took their 62 S3 pupils on 2 visits to Flanders Moss National Nature Reserve (NNR) as part of their Teaching in Nature professional development. Lucy was keen to embed outdoor learning in her practice and gain confidence in taking pupils outdoors. Lana had always been a supporter of outdoor learning but hadn’t been able to give it the time she felt it deserved of late. Both wanted to use the experience to support their pupils with the Added Value Unit in the new National 4/5 Geography qualification.

After taking part in the collaborative planning visit with colleagues and meeting the site manager to learn about the site on a cold winters day, both teachers felt it was quite a bleak place and were concerned that their pupils would be uninspired. Never-the-less, they persisted and planned their first pupil visit with a Physical Geography focus.

The children took part in a range of activities to develop their practical fieldwork skills, including field sketching; collecting weather data; use of quadrats and soil sampling. A further aim was to develop interpersonal skills through group work, which the pupils responded to well. They approached all the tasks with enthusiasm and put class-taught theory into context. Back in class, the pupils processed and presented the data they’d gathered in various formats. Both Lucy and Lana were surprised at how positive the pupils were about the visit and how keen they were to return.

Focussing this time on Human Geography, on their second visit, pupils considered past peat removal; implications for/of agriculture; settlement from the 18th Century; the conservation of such a rare habitat; and Flanders as a tourist destination. Despite having mixed feelings about the benefits of returning to Flanders with the same pupils, both teachers witnessed the value, saying “as they [the pupils] were returning to the same place they were far more confident and comfortable setting off and completing tasks; they took more ownership of the tasks on the second visit.”

“Based on our positive experience at Flanders Moss my colleagues and I have introduced more field trips as we have more confidence and belief in their benefits to pupils”
One year on and both Lucy and Lana have continued to take learning outdoors, visiting numerous sites with Advanced Higher and National 5 pupils. Neither had visited Flanders Moss NNR saying if funding had been available they would have liked to make regular visits and make seasonal comparisons. Both feel confident to take their classes where funding opportunities arise, e.g. they had accessed the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park travel grant.

As a result of their Teaching in Nature experience, both teachers say they are now more likely to collaborate with colleagues, including making collaborative planning visits to the site. Both say they now make longer, more regular and frequent outdoor visits. Both also feel more able to adapt their plans according to things that happen on the day, are less worried about planning for set Experiences and Outcomes and feel more able to justify and push for outdoor learning.

Back in the classroom, both say they are more able to make cross-curricular links and Lana says she now looks for different ways to review or assess learning. Lana has supported a probationary teacher to plan her outdoor learning, including the risk assessment, and Lucy has delivered sessions for colleagues with tips and ideas for getting the best of outdoor learning opportunities.

Lucy scored herself as ‘quite confident’ in delivering outdoor learning before taking part in Teaching in Nature, scoring herself ‘very confident’ after. Lana’s confidence also increased from ‘confident’ to ‘very confident’.

Lucy summarised saying “based on our positive experience at Flanders Moss my colleagues and I have introduced more field trips as we have more confidence and belief in their benefits to pupils.”

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 too.

If you’d like more information on Teaching in Nature or advice on how to use the approach in your context, contact: sharon.cunningham@snh.gov.uk

“I feel more confident in organising and taking pupils out to natural places for learning. It has also allowed me to see the benefits in terms of learning but also the wider reaching benefits such as developing more confidence and being able to work well together”