

# ECOLOGICALLY RESPONSIBLE SCHOOL FIELDWORK

## HOW THE NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY'S EDUCATION TEAM LEAVE ONLY FOOTPRINTS

More often than not, the anticipation of being out of the school classroom for the day inspires even the most reticent to bounce around and chatter continuously with excitement. The inspiration so many of us take from this beautiful, protected landscape is written across their faces in smiles, and the peril or promise of the open space is reflected in their body language.

As the students step off the coach we are bombarded with questions; are we going to build a den, when do we get lunch, where is the toilet, are we going to meet Peppa Pig, do the ponies have names Miss, what's poo is that?

Many of the students that our education and youth team work with, have simply never been to the New Forest before, some have never left the borders of Southampton, and they almost certainly don't own wellies.



*A child experiencing nature in the New Forest by feeling the flow of water over their feet in a place identified as safe to enter the water*

The novelty of the day is both hugely inspiring and daunting to them, before they have even stepped beyond the gravel of the car park. For some, it is utterly unfamiliar, so how can we possibly expect them to know the "buttercup" beneath their foot is an internationally rare plant?

We want to ensure the students have a good time and that we maximise the learning experiences of the day, while operating in a way which sustains the very reason we were inspired to visit in the first place. The key purposes of a National Park are to help people enjoy and understand the landscape, while at the same time protecting and conserving the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of this landscape. These objectives aim to keep National Parks protected for the benefit of the nation and future generations.



*The New Forest code, which is the general advise to all visitors to balance experiencing nature and conserving the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of this landscape*

One of the most important aspects of our work as education officers leading guided sessions is to prepare and plan ahead. We always conduct pre-visits with leaders on site and share information in advance with pupils, parents and teachers. The next part of this article gives just some of the best practice we follow and share with others focussing on what helps protect the landscape and wildlife.

How we plan and run any group visit is integrally linked to why we are running it.

## *KNOW THE LANDSCAPE*

What species might be under your feet? Where are the areas that ground nesting birds use or fish, like sea trout and brook lamprey, use to spawn? Are there any invasive species to avoid spreading elsewhere? Disturbance can be as problematic as destruction, so we don't take samples, we look don't touch, and we stick to the main tracks especially during ground nesting bird season. We tread carefully if stepping out to discover sundews, bog asphodel, and the miraculous abilities of sphagnum moss.

## *KNOW THE CULTURE*

Who else uses this landscape and how? The New Forest is a working forest, where tree felling and management takes place, and pony drifts occur in the late summer and autumn. It is also a place locals and visitors enjoy tranquillity or seek uncrowded spaces for reactive dogs to exercise. We talk to students about respecting the New Forest as a shared space.



*A group of students walking on the main track around a pool of water as part of a comprehensively planned educational visit to the New Forest. Planned with knowledge of the landscape, culture, water and landowner / manager permission.*

## *KNOW THE LANDOWNER / MANAGER*

Taking a group anywhere on public or private land means seeking landowner permission beforehand. Despite much of the New Forest being open access land under the CROW 2000 act, this is not an open permission for organised group visits, or any commercial activity. Landowners and managers coordinate what happens across the landscape to ensure there are no clashes between events, management work or carpark closures. Conversations with

## *KNOW THE WATERS*

Every muddy puddle contains more wildlife than you realise, so we treat small waterbodies and larger rivers with the same respect. There are very few safe spots to enter the water and study its flow, meanders and microhabitats. Working on the very edge of waterbodies can lead to bankside erosion and compaction, so instead, we often sketch, practice mindfulness, play Poohsticks and other games on bridges/walkways or away from the bank edge. However, there's nothing to rival the understanding of rivers that comes from feeling the flow of water lift your foot, the chill the first time it fills your welly, or joy watching minnows shoal over sunlit gravel before hiding in a deep eddy barely a footstep away.

## *RIGHT ACTIVITY, RIGHT PLACE*

We run a range of activities including river studies, map skills, WW2 local history discovery, and wellbeing welly walks. Almost everything can be adapted to have minimum impacts on nature. For example, where some schools measure river velocity by dropping orange peel, that doesn't happen in the New Forest, where we practice leave no trace. We make sure we clean our wellies and nets to prevent spread of invasive plants and diseases as part of leaving no trace. More intrusive or destructive activities (segways, drones, campfires, or foraging) we don't run and advise others to think twice and use better suited locations than the New Forest.

## *INVOLVE THE STUDENTS*

To develop observation and decision making skills in students, we encourage them to take responsibility for their own impact. We have done this as part of the morning risk assessment run through, getting students to consider risks to both themselves and the habitat. Ideas generated by young people range from don't touch the ponies, take your litter home, to alternative travel choices, and creating video diaries so others can see and share without having an impact. Ultimately, these children will leave with powerful memories of nature and place, hopefully linking in a desire to protect and conserve the landscape.



*A recent trip with Fawley Infant School at Bolderwood lead by Amy Moore, education and youth officer, where children experience nature first hand. Involvement in activities to think about their impact while on the trip hopefully leaves a desire to protect and conserve the landscape.*

*“No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced”*

**David Attenborough**

Useful resources and webpages:

[New forest water code](#)

[New Forest code - New Forest National Park Authority \(\[newforestnpa.gov.uk\]\(http://newforestnpa.gov.uk\)\)](#)

[New Forest - permission FAQs | Forestry England](#)

[New Forest - The Duke of Edinburgh's Award | Forestry England](#)

[The Countryside Code - National Trails](#)

There is an ever replenishing audience for outdoor education, each year teachers return with their new cohort. It is important that we keep educating and find a way to help every child experience their own moment of awe and wonder in nature, because each student stepping off the coach then becomes a responsible visitor now and for the future. Perhaps they will be the inspiration to a green career; ecologists, farmers, fundraisers, journalists, landowners, decision makers, CEOs, or volunteer; or as someone who cares and understands.

By planning inspirational experiences at the right time in the right places, operating in the best way we know how, in the long term we ADD value to the New Forest habitats we love.

Helen Robinson, Lead Education and Youth Officer, New Forest National Park Authority

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