

Let nature feed your senses



Conference report

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St Bride Foundation,
Bride Lane,
Fleet Street,
London EC4Y 8EQ

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Introduction



The one-day conference formed part of the *Let nature feed your senses* project, a project run by LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) and the Sensory Trust to engage people with the environment using farming and food production as a vehicle for sensory-rich experiences.

The project relies on the involvement of a wide partnership of individuals and organisations. It brings together farmers with environmental, care, education and community organisations. The project deliberately casts its net wide in order to reach the target beneficiaries who are some of the most hidden and disengaged in the community: older people, disabled people, children in urban areas far from the countryside, and young adults in areas of multiple deprivation. Small wonder then that reaching these groups is often time-consuming and frustrating. It *feels* difficult because it often *is* difficult. It is also hugely rewarding, as many of the host farmers at the conference attest.

The project is about forging emotional relationships with the environment. Often even those who have had some limited experience of the environment in the past have done so in ways that have kept them isolated from sensory experience: staying inside the bus instead of being rained on for instance. Sensory education and experience are known to attach more significant emotional connections to memories than fact-based, “hands-off” education can do. The intent of the conference was to share ways in which host farmers could increase the sensory experiences of the farm visits. Because of that, the conference was designed to not only have farmers share successful visit experiences (what worked well and what they had learned) but to also include a large element of “hands-on” sensory experience.

This report outlines the activities that went on, but cannot substitute for being there.

Welcome

Caroline Drummond, Chief Executive, LEAF opened the conference with a brief overview of the partnership between LEAF, who encourage sustainable farming, and the Sensory Trust who promote sensory experience as a way of learning about and connecting to the environment. She talked about the project's aim to foster a lifelong love of nature in those who are currently disengaged or denied access to the environment.

Passionate about agriculture (having received an MBE for her work in this area) she also highlighted what fantastic sensory-rich environments farm are. This brought home to everyone the precious window of opportunity for free access to the network of farms that the *Let nature feed your senses* project offers.





Maximising the health benefits of sensory-rich farm visits

In his keynote address Dr William Bird, Strategic Health Advisor, Natural England stressed the fundamental connection between humans and nature. The benefits of being outdoors – reduced stress, increased physical activity, increased sense of community – are well documented, and yet in the UK children today spend significantly less time outdoors than their grandparents. Today’s parents allow their children to roam an average of 300m from their home. Their grandparents had an average of six miles, or nearly 10 kilometers.

A disconnection from nature is a significant risk to health and many of the significant policy issues we face could be tackled by re-connecting people to nature and improving access to the wider environment. Evidence that this is a significant issue includes:

- A rise in cases of Ricketts in children due to lack of daylight and poor diet
- An increase in cases of mental illness – especially in children
- Obesity levels have tripled in the last 20 years

In 2005, 27.7 Million prescriptions were written for depression costing £338 Million despite evidence that antidepressants are not as effective a treatment for mild to moderate depression as physical exercise.

Dr Bird outlined a policy proposal for the entitlement of green space, access and outdoor play for children.

He is now extending his work on the benefits of green exercise through his company Intelligent Health.

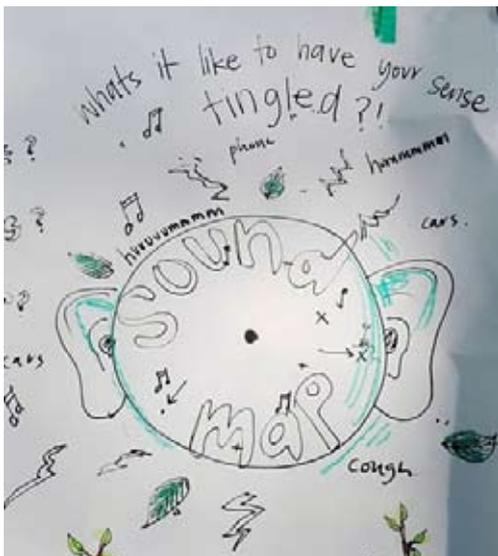
www.intelligenthealth.co.uk

Dr Bird’s presentation with notes can be viewed at:

www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org/letnature/Conference/williambird.aspx#eb

About the project

www.leafuk.org



www.sensorytrust.org.uk

Dr Bird was followed by James Taylor of LEAF who outlined the mechanics of the *Let nature feed your senses* project. He described the target beneficiaries: those who experience significant barriers to engaging with the environment. People from the poorest parts of England, older people, disabled people, and children from urban areas far removed from the countryside.

Sites such as commercial farms, care farms, city farms and nature reserves throughout the country had joined up to the project, reviewed their sites for accessibility and Health and Safety requirements and are now hosting visits.

He also described the network of coordinators: volunteers who liaise between the host sites and groups who are interested in making a visit and match the abilities and requirements of the group to the site, and made a plea for assistance from conference delegates to utilise their networks to extend the reach of the project.

Jen Bartlett from the Sensory Trust then spoke briefly about how the project was encouraging hosts to think of the visits in terms of sensory experience. She explained that the five senses are used by the farmers as a framework when preparing for a visit and that the project team had developed resources such as Discovery Bags that contained tools to help visitors focus on one or more of their senses. As an illustration she had the delegates sit in silence for two minutes to create a Sound Map, a visual representation of everything they could hear in the environment around them. This example of interactivity set the tone for much of the rest of the day.

Photographs of all the Visual Minutes can be found at <http://picasaweb.google.com/letnaturefeedyoursenses>

Positive experiences and lasting memories



Three hosts then talked about some of the “ah ha” moments from the past year of visits.

Sue Padfield from the West Country told how the children who visit their farm have a hands-on experience and a chance to get muddy and feel part of their environment. She talked of how busy these visits are as a lot gets covered to meet the curriculum outcomes required by the teachers.

She then contrasted a recent *Let nature feed your senses* visit with residents from a neighbouring care home, many of whom have dementia. The pace of the visit was slower and gentler, allowing more time for reflection. The visitors loved the smells of the cow’s breath and the vegetable garden. The taste of fresh peas straight from the pod brought back memories. Many of the visitors had worked on farms before or been evacuated from London during World War Two and the visit brought back many memories and generated a lot of conversation. Sue shared how she had thought a lot about the details in her visitors experience and what small things might help them reconnect to their past . “Mugs won’t do today”, Sue said, “we drank tea from old fashioned china.” The visit lifted the general atmosphere at the care home for weeks afterwards. What next, Sue wondered: baking bread perhaps?

Sue asked, “Who has benefitted most, me or the visitors?”

Jo North from a farm on the South Downs hosted a visit from a group of adults with learning disabilities. She has found that every visit has a special moment and it is hard to predict what that might be. While we might expect the animals to be the favourite attraction, one visitor was very happy in the tractor. Children with autism have lasting noisy memories: making simple shakers from grain and plastic cups, Jo was amazed to watch one young child pouring grain from one container into another for the whole of the visit. It was a very rhythmic and soothing experience and obviously very powerful. Dairy farms, with their computer-controlled

gadgetry, are great for technology geeks too. Jo echoed Sue's sentiments as she finished. "It has taught me so much... I'm not sure who gets more out of it, the visitors or me."

John Alpe from a farm in the North West of England talked about how he started by inviting the visitors to listen to the silence. There is no mobile phone reception at the farm and it was a good way to get the group engaged with their surroundings. He talked of the importance of keeping things simple. He said that it was amazing how little you have to do to engage visitors with the environment. He also talked about how you had to be prepared for any question. How do you catch the sheep? How do cows back up to the slurry pit? Whatever you are asked, deal with it!

In summary the hosts were delighted with the success of their visits. Among the lessons of the first year were:

- don't over-plan, but do have good conversations with the carers before the visit
- don't worry
- let them ask questions
- deal with the questions!
- the visits are a partnership with the community connectors and the organisations that decide to visit



The workshops – drawing, play and story

The hands-on activities for the conference were planned to be arts-based. It is important that the project builds farmers' confidence in using as wide a range of activities as possible to engage the diverse project beneficiaries. Whilst there are many resources already available online for engaging people with the outdoors, the majority take a science-based approach, for example by engaging with nature through understanding. Given the project's use of the five (or more) senses as a framework we are keen to explore means of engaging people emotionally with their surroundings and we encourage an arts-based approach — drawing, play and story telling/making — as a way of doing this.



Drawing workshop



Karina Thompson has 13 years experience leading arts-based projects with the community. These projects have been in locations as diverse as tents, woods, remand centres or isolation wards and with participants ranging from teenage cancer patients, people with mental health problems, young offenders and women or family groups. Zoe Partington-Sollinger runs two companies, Diablo and Ruby Associates. She has an interest in inclusive design, architecture and urban design. She is a conceptual artist with a specialist interest in the built environment internally and externally.

The workshop first dealt with the idea of drawing as something daunting. The term image making was used instead. The group explored traditional drawing materials and others that were familiar but which wouldn't immediately be associated with drawing such as carrots, leaves, and sticks.

The group used found objects and drawing to create artworks that took them on a touchable and "lookable" journey.

The participants were delighted to recapture some of the spirit of their childhood, and were surprised to find that such playful drawing and art making could engage an adult audience.

Play workshop



www.edenproject.com

The play workshop was hosted by Phillip Waters who is responsible for overseeing the creation of play opportunities which connect children to the environment at the Eden Project. The workshop used narrative as a means of deepening the engagement of participants with their environment and each other. It took the form of a Collaborative Story walk.

The workshop group were each invited to create a persona for themselves and choose a “superpower”. They then stepped through a “magic portal” and began a journey that involved using found objects to help construct a narrative. They went out onto Fleet street with their small jute bags (some looking sceptical!) for collecting their ‘special’ things, back they came with leaves and twigs but also ladders, a bicycle wheel, odd bits of plastic, and other unexpected finds. The stories that unfolded were rich and very lateral in the way the disparate objects became integral to the fantasy of the story. Everyone was surprised at how rich an activity it became and how much fun.

The workshop enabled the participants to go beyond the initial feelings that perhaps play is only for children. Children (and adults) need only permission in order to play, they play unconsciously and naturally. There is no need for expensive “play equipment”. Children see actions in objects, for instance a tree is an object to be climbed, hidden behind, hugged or sheltered under. Keep things simple, collect objects, put them together and allow our natural ability to play and create meaning through story to take over.

There are no laws in a story walk and anything can, and should, be possible. It’s make-believe play.

Story workshop

www.wildworks.biz

Mercedes Kemp is a core artistic member of WILDWORKS. As well as the production of text and story line, her role within WILDWORKS involves creating and maintaining relationships with host communities and exploring their relationships with place and memory. Her method involves a kind of eclectic ethnographic research into a variety of sources: archives, libraries, cemeteries, village halls, bus stops, local historians, town gossips, snapshots, old photographs, conversations, and, above all, a close observation of the process of memory and its effect on the value that people place on their environments.

The workshop showed how to turn simple stories into epics. Begin with an agenda and get involved in conversations and memories with the community. Investigate names: names are often memories of the land. Hold intergenerational tea parties to hear the stories of the community. Tea and cakes are very important and paper tablecloths can be written on as the conversation flows. Listen to darker memories and celebrate them too. Create object libraries and use these to weave stories.

Take visitors on a journey as you walk around the farm.



Bringing it all together

This session, facilitated by Susie Emmett, enabled the delegates to share some of their learning for the day with each other, and discuss how these would be applied in promoting or hosting visits. The three questions that framed their discussions were:

- 1 What will you take away from Dr Bird's talk?
- 2 What will you remember from the farmers' presentations of their experiences?
- 3 What will you use from the workshops, drawing, play and story to help make sensory-rich links between nature, food and farming?

Visual minute takers had drawn and noted the key points from all previous sessions on huge murals which were displayed on the walls of the main conference room surrounding the delegates. This was successful in not only providing a running visual summary of the day in real time, it also reinforced the importance of using the arts to enrich people's experience.

Sharing with the wider group included:

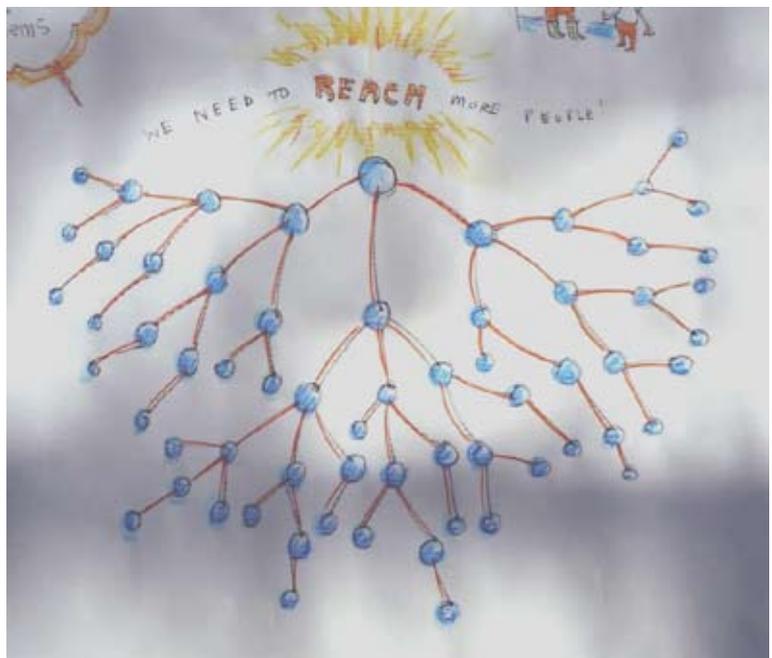
- Activities could be inexpensive to run, for example, carrots, leaves, twigs, apples from the drawing workshop, found objects from the play workshop and visitors bringing a 'special' object from the story workshop
- Many activities that were thought to be for children only can work equally well with adults
- More confidence to host visits for people with disabilities and elderly people.
- Stories are a very powerful (and previously underutilized) way of engaging visitors with each other, nature and the farm.
- Greater enthusiasm and sense of urgency for promoting the visits including approaching GPs and hosting presentations.
- Greater appreciation for how a sensory-rich visit differs from a walk-and-talk approach and keenness to bring draw, play and story into a visit.
- It has been valuable to look at things from many perspectives

Closure

Jane Stoneham, Director of the Sensory Trust, acknowledged the delegates, workshop leaders and host presenters for their creative, passionate and engaging participation – together they had made the conference exciting and abuzz with potential.

She reinforced the earlier message that the project relies on extending the opportunity to some of the most hidden and disadvantaged groups and invited everyone present to help reach more people.

Ending the day on a high note, Jane concluded that the success of *Let nature feed your senses* is based on inspired partnerships – farmers and their wider communities, communities and their local farmers and all those who help to strengthen these relationships.





LOTTERY FUNDED



Further information

www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org

www.leafuk.org

www.sensorytrust.org.uk

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Call Sensory Trust on 01726 222 900
or email enquiries@sensorytrust.org.uk