

Case Study

Lessons of the Landscape

Background

This project was developed as a joint initiative between Plumpton College's Children's Rural Education Centre (CREC), Farming and Countryside Education (FACE) and the SDNPA. It was designed to address the key issue that many children of school age are unaware of where their food comes from. It also looked to redress the growing disconnection that many children have with nature and the landscape in which they live.

A pilot project was part-funded in 2011/12 by a SCF grant of £5,512.50. This pilot proved highly successful and in 2014 a second phase of the project was rolled out to continue to embed the pilot into participating schools and extend the reach of the work across the area.

Understanding the role of farming in shaping the landscape of the SDNP and the valuable contribution that this practice continues to make to the local economy are key educational aims of the project and help to contribute to outcomes in the SDNP Partnership Management Plan.



The project

The Phase II project focused on 7 schools: Cradle Hill Primary, Plumpton Primary, Firle Primary, Rodmell Primary, Hamsey Community Primary, Iford and Kingston and Windmill Juniors.

Phase II of this project had the following specific aims:

- To enable schools to link to their local farms for educational visits
- To share best practice amongst schools within the cluster
- To provide a legacy on the school grounds
- To maintain existing connections
- To encourage new schools to participate

The overall project cost was £5,000, funded through the SDNPA. There was also in-kind support from both Plumpton CREC and FACE. The project was delivered on budget and enabled over 300 children to reconnect with the farmed landscape of the SDNP, proving excellent value for money; furthermore the project has a strong legacy in the partnerships created, which will continue to be supported by the FACE co-ordinator with no on-going financial cost to SDNPA.

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“A great project that kept the children engaged throughout. It was of great value for them to understand more about the local landscape and history”

Rachel Lewis, Hamsey Community Primary School

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The outcome

Each participating school received three sessions delivered by the CREC team at Plumpton College as well as local landowners. The initial session set the context of the SDNP, focusing on its history, habitats and landscape as well as why it is a special place. The second session provided a direct link to local farms or landowners and was delivered at sites within the SDNP. The content was tailored to individual schools to fit with their learning journeys and included observations of landscape characteristics, farming practices and habitat management as well as hands on activities such as mapping, sketching, species ID'ing, literacy activities, milling, grinding and making sausages!

Following the exploration of their local farmed landscapes the final session took place back in the school grounds. The aim of this last session was to make a positive change to their immediate environment and saw a range of activities including chalk and flint artwork, bird surveys, making bird feeders, greater understanding of the environment in their grounds, pond surveys and improvement, mini-beast hunts and growing fruit and vegetables.

The impact of the project was measured through evaluations of teachers, students and farmers. Teachers' feedback was really positive with many comments about the increased confidence to link their teaching to the local environment and the inspiration the project has given them to carry on with outdoor learning. Students were able to describe why the South Downs is a special place following their sessions and cited new skills that they had learnt as a result e.g. to understand our surroundings, to feed a lamb, how to plant plants, how to recognize wildlife, learning about both landscape and animals and working together as a team.

Farmers cited improved education links and community relations as reasons for participating and positive outcomes included the ability to determine which aspects of their offer would appeal to learners thus enabling a more targeted offer going forward.

The key learning gained from this project, which can be replicated in future projects, was the importance of making personal connections with the farmers/landowners and school staff, and demonstrating how to link this work to the school curriculum, including leaving a legacy in the school grounds.

The future

Conclusion

This project has demonstrated the value of making personal connections between schools and farms local to them to support learning about where food comes from and the farmed landscape of the SDNP. This has been of two way benefit with school staff appreciating the local introductions to farmers and seeing how the visit could be linked into a coherent curriculum plan that meets their learning journeys. Farmers have also benefitted from the work that the project has done to target their offer and to introduce them to local schools who would benefit from long-term relationships with the farm. Experience from FACE has shown that once schools have established a link with a farm, and they are happy with their experience, they are inclined to continue that visit annually.

The project has now ended with no further direct involvement from the SDNPA. The regional FACE co-ordinator will be available beyond the end of the project to support schools in this continued relationship with local farms and to continue to encourage the farmers and landowners involved to develop more school links, and continue to host school visits.

Lesson plans and resources generated through the project are available on the SDNP Learning Zone and we will continue to link schools to FACE/Plumpton and support through the learning networks.