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Wild ways: New Eco Rangers programme gets the kids outdoors

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Helen O'Callaghan looks at Eco Rangers, a Bord na Móna programme that aims to reconnect kids with the great outdoors.

THE girls at Gortskehy NS in Co Mayo loved the ladybugs but were a bit squeamish about the earthworms. Their teacher, Suzanne McDonald, was simply happy they'd had the opportunity to explore the "fabulous world of nature on their doorstep".

It's assumed children in rural schools will have an innate understanding of nature but that's not always the case, says McDonald. "We did a survey as to how much of the natural flora and fauna the children could recognise and name. We assumed they'd know much more than they actually did. We saw lack of understanding about what biodiversity is and its importance."



Ciarán Walsh, Harry Heffernan, and Isabelle Geraghty, pupils at Coolanarney National School, Tullamore, Co Offaly, launching the Bord na Móna Eco Rangers at Lough Boora Discovery, Co Offaly.



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Pupils from Gortskehy N.S. on their Eco Safari at Clare Lake, Claremorris, Co. Mayo. "It's assumed children in rural schools will have an innate understanding of nature but that's not always the case" says Ms. McDonald.

McDonald signed up her junior and senior infants, as well as first and second classes for Eco Rangers, a Bord na Móna primary schools programme that attempts to overcome the growing nature deficit among children by re-connecting them with nature in a fun, interactive way. The programme grew out of a sense that children are living in a very tech-driven world – they can struggle to identify a Puffin but can name all the Pokémon, they're able to spot a minion but not a magpie, they're happy to explore with Dora through a screen without stepping outside their front door.

"More and more, we're seeing young kids spending too much time on iPads and Playstations," says Sara Byrne of Bord na Móna. Yet, research consistently indicates direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood development and for children's physical and emotional wellbeing. "Young kids who learn and play outside get direct experience of weather, the seasons, wildlife, flora and fauna – things that are only possible outdoors – and they get to assess risks, solve problems and develop creativity," says Byrne.

Currently, 650 schools are signed up to Eco Rangers, with up to three classes per school actively going on Eco Safaris (nature walks). By end of school year, it's hoped more than 50,000 students will have got back to basics, got outdoors, got their hands dirty, and explored nature around them. Children learn about biodiversity through a series of educational and fun elements. Lesson plans are closely linked to the curriculum – so no extra work for the teacher, who's given all necessary tools: teacher packs, lesson plans and games, as well as a platform to record pupils' nature explorations.

Byrne says a diverse range of lesson plans encourage pupils to do tree rubbings, drawings, photos, map the area, build bug hotels and other activities to protect the area. "The purpose of sharing these, on ecorangers.ie, is to encourage parents and the wider community to learn about nature and to create a sense of guardianship over the space. It's about fostering a community with a shared love of nature, which can be in a schoolyard, a local park, woodlands walk, rivers or coastal areas."

Byrne is aware some pupils can't leave the schoolyard, but they may have school gardens.

"We'd encourage them to investigate what's growing there, what insects are in the garden."

Since Eco Rangers started, she has seen bug hotels built to varying levels of sophistication. "Some kids start building areas in their schoolyard to encourage hedgehogs – they use fallen branches or leaves. Some have made them with palettes – they're like hedgehog motels. Children create a space for these creatures and then are mindful of protecting that area."



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In Co Mayo, McDonald's pupils explored the natural hedgerows near the school. "We brought magnifying glasses and collection jars. We were looking for mini-beasts and natural vegetation. The children found vegetation from fir, whitethorn, sycamore. They found woodlice and even a fossil."

Once back in class, pupils completed their Eco-Safari journals. "We made a photo story – excellent for integrating ICT into the process," says McDonald, adding that it's very easy to take a purposeful nature walk around the school.

“

It opened all our eyes to the amount of life surrounding us all the time. It was a very multi-sensory learning experience. The kids absorbed so much knowledge. They got their hands muddy as they discussed their finds with their friends.

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"Children don't climb trees anymore. Years ago, they just went out and ran around. Getting involved in nature means getting out in the parks and running around and being out on a wet day throwing leaves at each other," says Joe McConville, president of the Tree Council of Ireland, who attended primary school in Wales.

"Our school had woods at the back. The last term ran until July and in good weather it was very common for teachers to take us out to the woods for lessons. It was full of bluebells. It instilled in me a love of nature, the fact we were doing ordinary lessons out among the trees. I was also lucky to spend summers on my uncle's farm in Longford – he would challenge me to name all the trees."

Each year, the National Tree Council of Ireland champions Tetra Pak Tree Day when tree saplings are made available through treeday.ie for primary school children to plant on their school grounds. Planting the saplings teaches children about the importance of planting trees to improve biodiversity. In addition, guided woodland walks are organised nationwide.

Meanwhile, Eco Rangers Awards will this year recognise and reward schools for their efforts throughout the year. Most schools have created scrapbooks, videos, posters and uploaded these safaris on the website, documenting what they find and see on their Eco Safari. And while the emphasis is on schools to participate, the programme can also be used by children with their families. Families can log on to ecorangers.ie and browse the eco safaris already uploaded.

Wild ways

Eco Safari experiences as reported by teachers/pupils on www.ecorangers.ie:

The whole school went on a bog safari to a local bog 2km from our school grounds. The bog is on the border between Knocknagoshel and Brosna Parish. [It] was a very educational experience as peatland surrounds the school area. T

he senior class also studied a blanket bog in SESE class. The children witnessed turf being cut at the bog by members of the community and they even got the opportunity to pike some turf themselves. They learned valuable information on the turf cutting process and the equipment used in the past such as a hay knife, spade and a sleán. The children then logged information in their logbook on the bog.

We went on a walk on the trail around Lough Lannagh in Castlebar. As we walked we looked at what was growing around and near the lake. We saw some ducks swimming and even heard a robin singing in a tree as we walked by.

Our entire school took part in a make-a-bug-hotel-day on our school grounds, [which led] on from our interest in biodiversity and mini-beasts. We collected items in our local environment and brought all of it to the school to join together. [It was] an idea from Lough Boora trip earlier this year. [There was] great participation from younger classes in the school – it's at our new school garden site at the side of our school.

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