

## Project outline: Generation Wild

### 'Inspiring a new generation of nature lovers'

#### Introduction

Here at WWT our vision is to create a world where healthy wetland nature thrives and enriches lives. Central to this goal is people taking action to protect nature. In order for this to happen, we need to create a generation that cares about the natural world and the wildlife within it.

If children are to care for the natural world, they need to feel connected to it. Generation Wild will provide teachers and guardians with the confidence, knowledge and skills to provide nature-based experiences for their children now and in the future. This will increase the connectedness to nature of the children in their care over the long-term and imbue them with a lifelong love of the natural world. The project will focus on economically disadvantaged communities who are more likely to experience a disconnection from nature.

Through Generation Wild:

- 45,000 children from schools in economically disadvantaged areas will visit our wetland centres free of charge
- 9,000 families from these areas will benefit from a free visit to one of our centres
- 500 teachers will benefit from teacher training

This approach is new and innovative for WWT as it will:

- Shift the focus from a single visit to longer term interaction, engagement and off-site support
- Seek to embed long-term changes in attitudes and behaviour that will have a positive effect on the natural world for years to come
- Look to create innovative onsite and offsite experiences and interactions by working with exciting creative partners to push the boundaries of what is possible
- Co-create all aspects of the project with the audiences for whom it is developed

By the end of the project, the following will have been developed, tested, refined and on offer across 7 wetland centres with the potential for ongoing use:

- Innovative approaches and activities for engaging disadvantaged children and hard-to-reach families at our wetland centres
- An online platform to incentivise and reward nature-based activity within gardens, school grounds and local greenspaces
- A teacher training course promoting the benefits of outdoor learning and exploring nature-connection activities that can be completed within school grounds and local greenspaces

#### Rationale

The evidence suggests that it is not enough to learn about the natural world<sup>1</sup>. If people are to develop a love of nature, and take action to protect it, they need to experience it directly; see it, feel it, hear it, smell it and most importantly feel part of, rather than separate from it<sup>2</sup>.

Positive early childhood experiences are crucial in this respect<sup>3</sup>.

Unfortunately, we are in danger of raising a generation of young people that has become disconnected from the natural world. Do you remember climbing trees and building dens as a child? What about going on nature walks and contributing to the 'nature table' at school? I

certainly do, but ask today's children when they're older and you might get a very different answer. There are many reasons for this, including perceived danger from strangers, increases in traffic and a lack of green (and blue) spaces for children to play<sup>4</sup>. Schools are much less likely to provide activities connecting children with nature due to health and safety fears and a focus on academic results in a narrow range of subjects. Add to this recent increases in the use of technology and you're more likely to find today's children glued to a screen than climbing a tree<sup>5</sup>.

Our current learning programme goes some way to addressing these issues, providing opportunities for children to become immersed in nature, directly engaging with the wildlife at our centres. However, research we have conducted shows that the long-term impact of school visits is limited due to a lack of continued engagement with nature back in the local community<sup>6</sup>.

We need children to develop a long-term relationship with the natural world; one that they can carry with them throughout their lives and pass on to the next generation.

## **Approach**

### *Working with disadvantaged communities*

Evidence shows that children from economically disadvantaged communities are much less likely to develop this relationship than their more affluent counterparts as they are less likely to spend time in nature with their families<sup>7</sup>.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a feeling among many within these communities that nature is not for them. They worry that they won't fit in, don't have all the right equipment and clothing and don't know the names of all the animals. Many parents and carers in these communities missed out on these opportunities as a child. As a result, they feel uncomfortable in natural environments<sup>8</sup> and lack the skills and confidence to provide nature-based experiences for their children<sup>9</sup>.

Our centres provide an ideal opportunity to overcome these barriers. They are more 'family-friendly' than a typical nature reserve. We have facilities such as cafes, toilets and play areas as well as wilder areas that people can explore, immersing themselves in nature. At our centres, people are able to get up close to wildlife (in contrast to a typical nature reserve), interacting with animals in their natural environment (in contrast to a typical zoo).

We have a wide diversity of people visiting (not just experienced naturalists). In particular, large numbers of families visit, so parents visiting with their children are less likely to feel that they don't fit in. We also have a range of people on site to support them, such as our volunteer 'guides in the hides' who will talk them through what they can see in a simple, easy to understand manner. This means that our centres are places where they can feel comfortable and will be supported in developing confidence and an appreciation of wildlife and natural environments. They provide an ideal 'stepping stone' from visitor attraction to nature reserve and a potential first step into a lifetime spent exploring and appreciating the wild.

### *Using the five pathways to nature connection*

Evidence shows that if we want people to love nature and take action to protect it, it is not enough to simply teach them about nature. After all, this has generally been the approach to date and it hasn't got us very far. Recent research by Miles Richardson and the University of Derby suggests that there are [five main pathways to nature connectedness](#) - senses, emotion, compassion, meaning and beauty - and that engaging people with nature through these pathways is much more likely to lead to a long-term love and respect of the natural world, leading people to take action to protect nature both locally and globally. The activities promoted through Generation Wild have been designed to engage people using these pathways.

#### *Free school visits as route into work with the wider community*

Historically, WWT, like many other conservation charities, has struggled to effectively engage with economically disadvantaged communities. Our first challenge is making these communities aware of WWT and the facilities we offer. Our Formal Learning Programme provides an ideal opportunity for us to do so, using schools as a route into working with the wider community.

The number of schools visiting us from these communities is currently limited. This is largely a result of reduced school budgets and increased transport costs meaning that parental contributions are required. Many parents are, unfortunately, unable to contribute as a result of their financial circumstances. Therefore, we will offer free visits (inc. free transport) to schools in economically disadvantaged areas in order to break down this barrier, inspire these children and lead into further work with them, their schools and their families.

#### *Co-Production*

We will work with these communities to gain a better understand of the barriers and how they can be overcome. Evidence shows that co-production of interventions can be key to encouraging their use<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, parents, carers, teachers and the children themselves will become co-designers, ensuring that the project activities and approach work for the communities involved. This will enable us to develop innovative activities and resources to effectively engage with these and other 'hard-to-reach' groups.

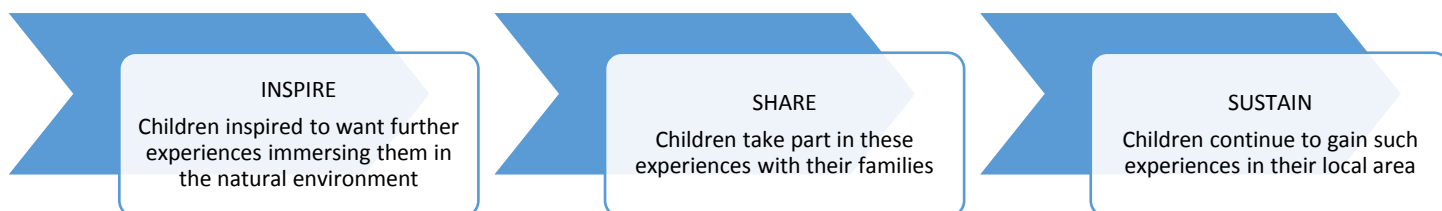
Further to this, we will look to partner with some of the most innovative experience designers in the country to create truly unique interactive experiences onsite and offsite. We will set the standard for how young people and their facilitators can be engaged with nature.

#### *Offsite Engagement*

We will provide parents, carers and teachers with the skills and confidence required to provide ongoing nature-based experiences back in their local communities. This will help to change perceptions of nature among these communities, increasing levels of nature connectedness whilst going some way towards creating a generation that cares for the natural environment and strives to protect it.

#### **Project activities**

The project has three main elements:



### Inspire > School Visits

Generation Wild will provide free school visits for up to 15,000 children per year from schools in economically disadvantaged areas<sup>1</sup>. The majority of these children will be aged 5-11 because the evidence shows that environmental behaviour develops from early childhood and starts consolidating from age 10 onwards<sup>11</sup>. During this visit, children will experience direct contact with nature through a range of 'wild experiences' based on the five pathways to nature connection. We will provide real 'wow' moments such as feeding a bird from the hand for the first time or discovering a pond creature they didn't even know existed. This will inspire these children and build a desire for further such experiences.

### Share > Family Visits

The children that have visited are ideal ambassadors, making their families aware of WWT and the facilities and activities we offer. A trip to our centres may not be something these families have previously considered and there may be financial barriers preventing this. Therefore, every child that visits will receive a free family visit voucher. Based on an estimated redemption rate of 20%, we forecast that approximately 3,000 families will visit through the scheme per year.

We will co-develop and trial ways of encouraging families to go 'off the beaten track', exploring the wilder areas of each centre, where they will take part in activities based on the five pathways to nature connection. Typically when families visit, particularly for the first time, they stick to the main pathways and visitor attractions. This doesn't encourage the type of immersion in the natural environment that we would like to promote.

The activities we develop will promote inter-generational interaction via cutting edge experiences. There is growing evidence that child to parent intergenerational learning is a promising pathway to encouraging positive attitudinal and behavioural changes<sup>12</sup> among both children and adults. Parents will come away with a range of activities that can easily be replicated in their local area. The children will then integrate these activities into their own play and their parents will feel more confident in facilitating and encouraging exploration of the natural world. They will see that their children aren't concerned about getting a bit muddy and that the natural environment is not something to be feared.

### Sustain > Online platform for families

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<sup>1</sup> Those where over 20% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, a commonly used socio-economic indicator.

Once we have inspired families and demonstrated what is possible, we will incentivise them to continue to offer these experiences for their children through an online platform. This platform will build on the narrative and activities introduced through the school and family visits, presenting families with a range of activities to be completed in gardens and local greenspaces. Some of these will encourage further contact with nature, whilst others will focus on taking steps to improve biodiversity. There will be a wide range of activities to choose from, ensuring that each family is able to choose those most appropriate according to their local circumstances. Incentives will be offered to encourage and reward participation.

### **Sustain > Teacher training and online platform for schools**

We also want to ensure that children are provided with further nature-based experiences through their schools. Many of today's teachers are from a generation that missed out on opportunities for direct contact with nature and may be nervous about taking groups of children outside. In addition, most teachers will have received very little in the way of science or outdoor education training. Therefore, we will offer free teacher training to staff from schools that visit through the project. These training sessions will aim to increase staff confidence, demonstrate the considerable benefits of outdoor learning and showcase simple activities that can be replicated back in school. This will include activities that can be delivered in even the smallest of outdoor spaces (as many of the visiting schools will be in urban areas with limited school grounds).

Schools will have their own online platform similar to that outlined above. As an added benefit, these schools have the potential to act as community 'hubs' encouraging participation in the family visits and ongoing activities and coordinating some of these activities on our behalf.

### **Evaluation**

At the end of this programme we want to demonstrate the impact it has had. These impacts will be evaluated using a mixed-method approach, utilising both quantitative and qualitative evaluation techniques. This information can be used to enhance the overall impact of Generation Wild, through demonstrating the importance of getting out into nature and inspiring other organisations to develop similar programmes in the future.

As the project progresses, data will be collected on:

- The number of children visiting with their schools.
- The activities completed by these children.
- The number of families (and family members) redeeming their free family visit vouchers
- The on-site activities completed by these families
- The activities families complete back in the local community
- The number of school staff attending the training days
- The activities schools complete in their school grounds and local greenspaces

Alongside this data, we will monitor the following metrics, exploring how these change according to the level of engagement in the project:

- Levels of nature connectedness

- Levels of care / concern for the natural environment
- Levels of pro-nature behaviour
- Levels of mental wellbeing

These metrics will be measured at various points during a child's engagement with the project, allowing us to see if there is a relationship between level of impact and degree of participation in the programme.

Our academically rigorous findings will be shared across the conservation, education, academic and health sectors and published in relevant peer-reviewed journals. There is the potential of creating new evidence in support of nature-based play and learning; evidence that could contribute towards policy change, altered funding priorities and justification for schools to increase levels of outdoor learning in the future.

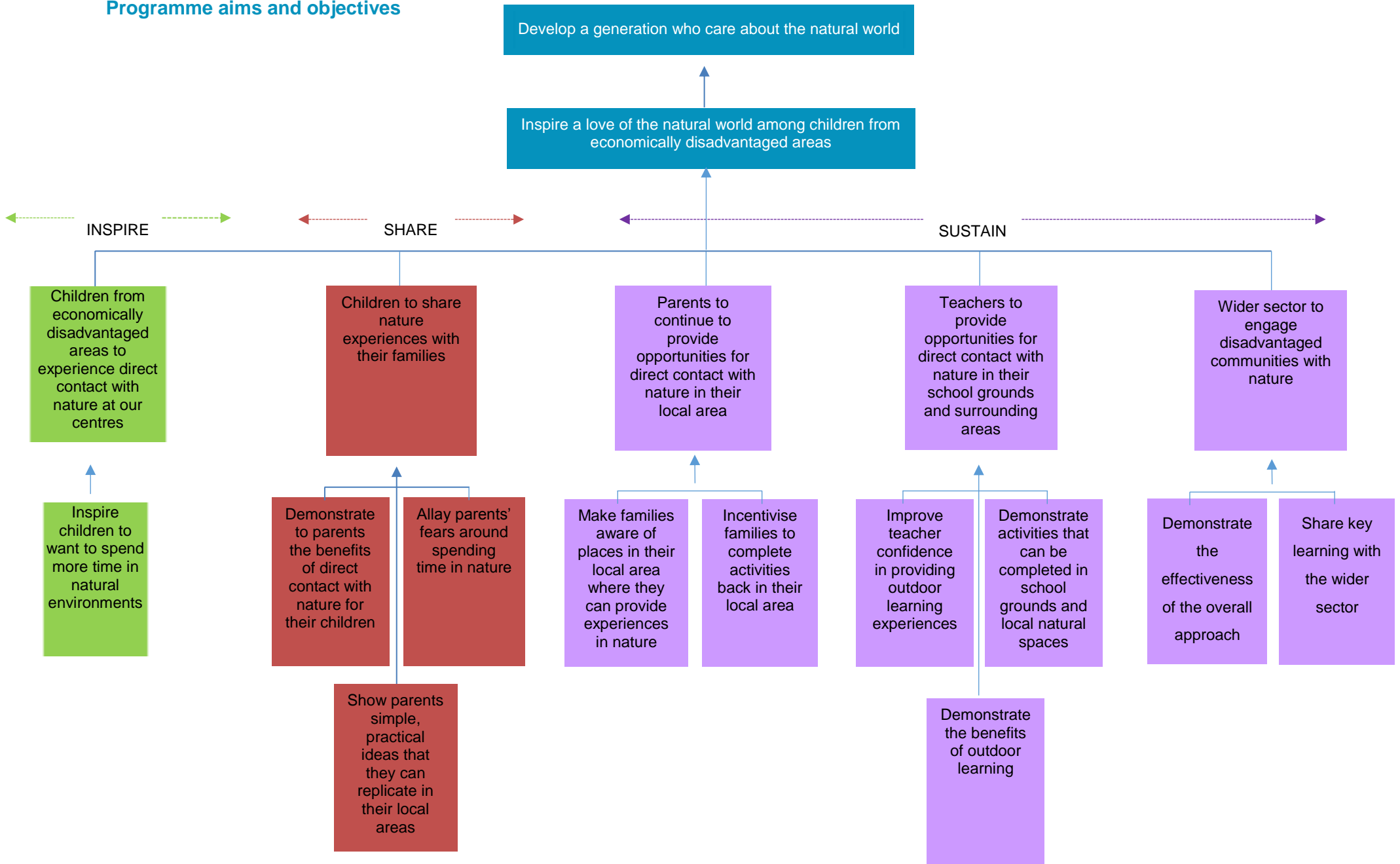
### Project legacy

Generation Wild will have a lasting legacy beyond the end of the project:

- 45,000 children will be engaged via a free visit to one of our centres during which they will have been inspired to spend more time outside in natural environments.
- 9,000 sets of parents will continue to provide nature-based experiences for their children, using the skills, confidence and inspiration they will have gained from the project.
- 500 teachers will increase the amount of outdoor learning they provide to their classes.
- As a result of working with, and learning from, economically disadvantaged communities, we will have developed approaches and resources proven to attract and benefit these and other hard-to-reach groups. These will continue to be used after the project is completed to improve our offer for these groups and extend our reach to new audiences. These will include on-site activities and the online platform to engage people back in their local communities.
- We will have developed a proven model for delivering teacher training, something that we will continue to offer alongside the school awards.

As a result, many of the children (and other family members) that take part in the project will develop a love of nature that will stay with them throughout their lives. They may also find their own 'special places'; green spaces and wild areas within their locality which come to mean something special to them. Areas which they will love and protect, and which they may visit with their own children. Ultimately, this will have long term benefits for local nature and for the planet as a whole.

# Programme aims and objectives



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- <sup>3</sup> Hughes, J., Richardson, M., & Lumerc, R. (2018) Evaluating connection to nature and the relationship with conservation behaviour in children *Journal for Nature Conservation*, Volume 45, September 2018, Pages 11-19 See also [www.rspb.org.uk/Images/naturalthinking\\_tcm9-161856.pdf](http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/naturalthinking_tcm9-161856.pdf)
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- <sup>9</sup> Anna Cronin-de-Chavez, Shahid Islam, Rosemary R.C. McEachan (2019) Not a level playing field: A qualitative study exploring structural, community and individual determinants of greenspace use amongst low-income multi-ethnic families, *Health & Place*, Volume 56, Pages 118-126, ISSN 1353-8292, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.01.018>.
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