Nature and wellbeing in poetry
by Clare Mulley

Introduction
This resource provides the basis for an understanding of nature and wellbeing in poetry. It is designed as an accompaniment to a poetry challenge by the T.S. Eliot Prize-winning poet Jen Hadfield for Young Poets Network – youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk – developed in collaboration with the charity People Need Nature – peopleneednature.org.uk. Young Poets Network also offers information and resources which will be useful for teachers and poets alike.

Rediscovering the natural world
Writing about the outdoors should automatically mean having some contact with it, and reaping all the associated psychological benefits. While the age of the tablet has definite advantages in terms of learning, it also means that many young people may now be all too used to having their entertainment provided at the touch of a button, without the need for independent thought.

I have taught groups who quite literally panic without instructions; when told to free-write, children are still putting up their hands every few seconds, asking “What should I say?”, forgetting how to have fun imagining from scratch.

The aim of this resource is to help redress this balance a little – unlike the Internet, Nature won’t just come to you; you have to be prepared to go in search of it. Ever noticed how may good children’s books begin with the main characters going for a walk? The tasks below put students into situations where they have to go outside, rely on their own senses and take the initiative.
Exercise 1: Joy and freedom
When you are very young, the countryside seems like an adventure park, and it can be hugely exhilarating to run around in those open spaces. This workshop helps students get back into that unashamedly childlike mind-set, which associates nature with freedom.

As a whole class, read two or more outdoorsy poems which express a childish sense of joy. Good examples include:

- ‘A Boy’s Song’ by James Hogg (bit.ly/1PDy4rN)
- ‘Fern Hill’ by Dylan Thomas (bit.ly/1SubGFL)
- ‘[in Just-]’ by E.E. Cummings (bit.ly/1yMVh4Z)

The last poem offers a brilliant contrast to the others if you want to do a side-by-side poetry analysis, because it doesn’t use obvious images, but instead coins the gorgeous phrases “mud-luscious” and “puddle-wonderful”.

Ask for comments on the tone of the poems and start a discussion – how old is the narrator? How do they think the narrator is feeling? What is it about the world outside that makes them feel that way? Now divide the class into small groups with a poem each, and get them to identify poetic features which help to create this sense of joy. Depending on ability, you could give them worksheets split into columns with headings like ‘alliteration’, ‘assonance’, ‘personification’ and ‘onomatopoeia’.

Exercise 2: Walk on the wild side
The best thing about a walk is that you can make it real or imaginary. Either arrange a short, clearly set out walk in an outdoor spot near you with plenty of wildlife or, if that isn’t possible, imagine a walk which you can recreate in a classroom setting, and do a step-by-step narration with ‘props’.

This activity works for all ages, because it is possible to tailor the walk (and what you might see on it) to different levels of maturity. An extra challenge is a night walk, which takes away the obvious sights and sharpens the other senses. Give students the task of collecting props as a run-up to the workshop – another opportunity to get them outside. These could include cuttings to sniff, objects like stones and feathers to hold, or photos. You can also use video clips and recordings; look up recordings of birdsong, or use a natural ambience CD. As things ‘progress’, students must write down what they see, hear, touch, feel, smell and taste. Tell them to write without editing or over-thinking.

Keep asking questions:
- What noises can you hear?
- What might have caused them?
- What can you smell?
- How does the ground feel under your feet?

Poet’s tip
When on the spot, children often lose their nerve and blurt out general terms like ‘lovely’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘scary’ - creative cul-de-sacs which stop something more interesting from developing. Block obvious dead-ends by making a banned ‘boring word list’. It’s also a great idea to ban basic colour words; try to help them come up with more striking adjectives which reflect what it reminds them of, e.g. ‘orange’ or ‘yellow’ could be replaced by ‘sunset’ or ‘flaming’, and ‘pink’ is like ‘an embarrassed cheek’ or ‘candyfloss’.
Exercise 3: Focus on Haiku
The beauty of the seasons remains a focal point in Japanese culture. Haiku are famous for their simplicity, which is designed to reflect the purity of nature. They may look easy, but haiku are a challenge precisely because of their compactness. Writing one is a very valuable exercise in cutting out all but the essential vocabulary in order to make an image more striking.

Most people know that haiku have three lines with a syllabic pattern of five, seven, five, but they must also have a seasonal reference (kigo) like cherry blossoms or autumn leaves as the subject. An interesting idea would be to create urban haiku, to make students examine nature in everyday life. Maybe a red fox slipping through a dark garden? Moss on a subway wall? A tiny flower which has forced its way through a pavement crack?

These haiku rules are enough for younger groups, but if you want to stretch older groups, mention the other traditional feature – a juxtaposition between two images or ideas in the poem (kiru). Show them Basho’s frog poem as an example; this uses a clever contrast between noise and silence to paint the scene (bit.ly/1TgfZMe). The Haiku Foundation also has lots of modern examples on their webpage: (bit.ly/1PDwYfH).

Exercise 4: The sublime and the scary
The Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake, were as inspired by the terror and grandeur of nature as its gentler beauties. They understood that exploring this element (which they called ‘the sublime’) aroused very strong emotions for both writer and reader. Children should be encouraged to think of this side of nature, and explore what they find unsettling about it – ‘uncomfortable’ subjects often create fantastic poems.

As a class, read Seamus Heaney’s ‘Death of a Naturalist’ (bit.ly/1XZWvWz) and Ted Hughes’ ‘Pike’ (bit.ly/1RNUSwJ). Talk about the dark, complex side of nature they represent. Are the poets saying ‘bad’ things about the animals? Are we meant to dislike them? In the case of Heaney’s poem, talk about how getting older affects your view of animals.

Ask the group to write a list of bullet-points, describing a time when they saw the frightening side of nature. Encourage them to list things that were spectacular or awe-inspiring – the raw power of a thunderstorm, for example – as well as things that made them afraid. You can then ask them to lift their favourite lines from it as material for a poem, perhaps using contrasting lines to emphasise the ‘sublime’ and the ‘scary’.

If your class has been studying war, also look at the more sobering examples of nature imagery used by poets like Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen. My own poem, ‘Colonel Okey’s Ambush at Sulby Hedge’ (see page 5) involves using wildlife metaphors to portray the tension and discomfort of a battlefield (bit.ly/1V3PEgD).
Creating a scrapbook
After these exercises, your groups will have plenty of material for writing at least one nature poem each. They could choose to write a longer list poem based on their ‘walk’, a series of haikus focusing on one creature or object, or a contrast poem about the ‘light’ and ‘dark’ aspects of nature.

If you want a fantastic way to display them, create nature poetry scrapbooks, either in groups or as a class. These could detail the route of your walk, using poems about different animals and objects as markers, with photographs, drawings and scraps of handwritten notes to provide extra interest.

Poet’s tip
Challenge groups of pupils to write in the ‘voice’ of an animal, plant or stone rather than just describing it in their own eyes. What would it see? How would it view other natural things? How would it view us?

About the author
Clare Mulley is a London Laureate, and a poetry columnist for The Skinny. Currently, she is Poet in Residence at The Battlefields Trust, a charity which works to preserve battlefields for posterity, and the Hampshire School, Chelsea. Her next project is an Arctic residency in Svalbard, where she hopes to produce a work on global warming. Clare leads freelance poetry workshops for schools across the UK.
Colonel Okey’s Ambush
at Sulby Hedge

By Clare Mulley

They had skirted the hedge, looking all the time for the softest path
free from betraying twigs. Somewhere a horse
whickered at silence, the smell of it

pressed down
and there suddenly

the others, standing twenty breaths’ distance.
The moment rounds, grows pendulous,
a water bead

hung on the grass that fringes them, as yet untrampled –
yards away, one lad yawns,
another tosses ribaldries, unsure of how to fill an instant
both eternal and long lost (not knowing they’re already dead
as fate and earth can will it – as all flesh is dead at birth)

but he

who must set the cogs in motion, pauses
a kestrel that mounts air’s summit without diving,
wary of the still field he must break

and make home.

He cocks his musket, one eye closes;
all creation hackles, that last instant, at the catch
of metal brushing back upon itself, gathered to spring.
There will be no undoing
the spark that follows.

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