

Forest schools: are you cool enough?

Richard Hopker, January 2014

Richard received an Education Fund award towards the costs of a college study tour. Forest schools have been in the British consciousness for decades, originating from Scandinavia, but have only recently flourished in terms of awareness and popularity. In the last decade, forest schools have become a market competitor to conventional nurseries and are now a viable business opportunity. Primary and secondary schools up and down the country have also introduced regular visits to woodlands, combining outdoor education with their curriculum using private practitioners, volunteers, charities and specially-trained teachers.

The principle is to incorporate child-led, free play and to allow children to take risks that would not normally be open to in the classroom. The main activities are den-building, fire skills, wood work, cooking, and exploring the environment, but the list is varied and children will create their own activities.

Forest schools aim to improve the learning of useful skills and knowledge in a child by encouraging physical interaction with their environment. It has been proven in a great wealth of studies that people learn more effectively when active and allowed freedom to communicate with their fellow students, aiding social and environmental awareness, as well as, key skills such as literacy and maths.

All ages and abilities, including adults with special educational needs, benefit from these activities. Allowing the use of a woodland space will allow the whole community to take part in a wonderful environment. Grants and funding are also available to set up, or help maintain, such projects. Teachers come with their own insurance and are trained in elements of woodland management, which they teach, in theory and practice, meaning that you could find someone willing to help you manage part of your wood in exchange for use of the land, while any tree-planting you need could become a lesson for a whole school! At the end of each lesson, the camp fires are extinguished and a 'leave-no-trace' policy is enforced, teaching the next generation self-discipline in respecting and protecting the nation's woodland.

As a private woodland owner, you may have considered your link with education to be a by-product of stakeholder engagement, or a philanthropic commitment to a college (such as, the talks kindly shared with the National School of Forestry). Through forest schools, there is an opportunity to combine the provision of educational facilities with a regular small income, as well as, making a fine contribution to the next generation.

Ground rent being a small contribution, this venture is best for the smaller woodland owner, or those with an unproductive patch of broadleaves, or some open ground with a few trees. The forest school really only requires a quarter of a hectare of fairly level ground, with light canopy, or just a few trees. A trickling beck can be advantageous, but not essential; and a distinct lack of life-threatening hazards, such as, precarious cliffs, scrap metal heaps, or towering log-piles may be preferred by some groups, although awareness and understanding of hazards is one of the mantras of forest school.

The needs of the forest school are light: indeed, you will see many benefits, as well as, the occasional, minor inconvenience, such as, having to schedule felling operations. A forest school needs to be near road access, a short walk from a minibus parking place and in many

cases, within a five-minute walk from the school (on little legs).

As a woodland owner or manager, education is an essential part of engaging with the public and a forest school is a great opportunity to connect with the future adults who may be enjoying, managing or felling the trees you plant.

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