

EDUCATION FOR NATURE RESTORATION LEADERS' FORUM: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Biodiversity in Crisis - The Role of Education in Supporting Nature

The EU Nature Restoration Law is the first continent-wide comprehensive law of its kind and sets binding targets for all member states to restore degraded ecosystems, particularly those with the most potential to capture and store carbon and to prevent and reduce the impact of natural disasters. The law sets out to restore wetlands, rivers, forests, grasslands, marine ecosystems and the species they host in order to: increase biodiversity; secure the things nature does for free, like cleaning our water and air, pollinating crops, and protecting us from floods; limit global warming; and build up Europe and Ireland's resilience in preventing natural disasters and reducing risks to food security.

Ireland must submit a National Restoration Plan to the commission in September 2026, outlining how we will deliver on the targets to 2030, 2040 and 2050. Ireland has adopted a Whole of Government Whole of Society approach to drafting and implementing its plan and a series of Leaders' Forums form part of the stakeholder engagement process. Our education system plays a key role in supporting a thriving society and will be fundamental to supporting and developing Ireland's approach to nature protection and restoration. An Education for Nature Restoration Leaders' Forum was held in June 2025, and this executive summary synthesises insights from over 80 education leaders, policymakers, educators, and students who participated in that meeting.

As detailed below, participants identified our formal education system as a way to inspire meaningful connection to nature, reflecting a broad and deep understanding for all learners. They identified a goal to create a generation that is prepared for and embraces environmental stewardship, with an understanding that we are part of nature and not separate to it. Participants highlighted the need for nature education and ecological literacy to be embedded throughout our curricula from early childhood through to post-primary education and beyond. They outlined how many students currently graduate without developing an understanding of the natural world, particularly children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The forum shared examples of excellent work underway in schools across the country and proposed the Nature Restoration Law as an opportunity for all schools, at the heart of every community, to celebrate their natural heritage and become places where nature is cherished, cared for and protected. Participants envisioned Ireland positioning itself as a leader in nature restoration and stewardship practices, with education playing a central role in this national transformation. Despite identifying education as central to creating a generation of environmental stewards, the forum identified a stark reality that our current curricula fail to build ecological literacy¹ due to a decreased focus on ecology, plants, insects, micro-organisms, and marine environment.

The Crucial Role of Education in Supporting a 'Whole of Government Whole of Society' approach to Nature Restoration

Our national curricula, our schools and our teachers are foundational to empowering learners as environmental stewards into the future. In order to tackle the national biodiversity crisis and ensure

¹ Ecological literacy in this document refers to literacy about the interconnectedness of all life, marine, terrestrial and within the biosphere

Ireland meets its legally binding nature restoration targets through to 2050 the following actions were identified:

- Emphasise the role of plants in ensuring a thriving planet and integrate plant biology across curricula at early-childhood, primary and post-primary levels.
- Encourage the teaching of botany, ecology (terrestrial and marine) and forestry at primary, post-primary, and third-level institutions, addressing graduate shortages that impact sectors like planning and conservation.
- Support teacher professional development in nature education, eco-literacy, and ocean-literacy from initial teacher education and across the continuum of teacher education, prioritising access to outdoor learning in natural settings and national parks where possible.
- Expand support for schools to promote and develop nature and outdoor education on school grounds, prioritising habitats for pollinators and other wildlife where appropriate and possible.
- Foster local environmental connections where schools connect students to their local environment, natural heritage, and local community in order to connect with native species, local conservation and local farmers, fishermen, foresters, or other landowners.
- Develop an education stream within the National Parks and Wildlife Service, making all national parks accessible educational spaces for schools and local communities.
- Support educational institutions across all levels of education to model sustainability, including a focus on protecting nature and biodiversity through their own operations, demonstrating that environmental stewardship and institutional success are compatible rather than competing priorities.

Nature Education as a Cross-Curricular lens & Ecological Literacy as Core Competency

Nature Education refers to teaching and learning about the natural environment and emphasises how it is fundamental to a thriving society and economy. While there has been an increased and essential focus on climate and sustainability in recent education policies and specifications, this has not reflected the foundational aspect of nature in our lives. It is therefore important that nature education be integrated in relevant curricula and ecological literacy (as outlined on page 1) be identified as a core curricular competency, so that all citizens understand the essential role of nature in our lives. Actions identified at the forum include:

- Develop a curriculum framework that explicitly links ecological literacy to all disciplines in order to recognise that nature education is not another burden on a crowded curriculum, but rather a lens through which all learning becomes more relevant and engaging.
- Give students time and experiences in nature in order to foster care and respect for nature, thereby empowering students to tackle environmental problems that exist for the future in nature and climate.
- Centralise the concept of an ecological approach to education and curricula. In particular, for subjects that directly teach about nature at post primary level (Biology, Climate Action and Sustainable Development, Agricultural Science, Geography) reduce the anthropocentric focus and emphasise the importance of plants, insects, microorganisms, and non-human

animals. For the new primary curriculum, which places a strong and coherent emphasis on nature, ensure well-designed professional development is available to all teachers in order to support them in implementing the curriculum.

- Retain a focus on nature education and ecological literacy across all curriculum developments during the time-frame of the Nature Restoration Law (i.e. to 2050 and beyond).

Empower Educators to Be Confident, Caring and Knowledgeable about Nature

Teachers across the entire education system are key to any reform. To ensure our education system plays a key role in ensuring a Whole of Government Whole of Society approach to the Nature Restoration Law, we should encourage and support a generation of teachers who are dedicated, passionate and committed to teaching future generations about the rich diversity of life on the island of Ireland, how our lives are interconnected and dependent on nature and how everyone has a role in protecting our national biodiversity. There is therefore a need for comprehensive continuous professional development that combines ecological knowledge with teaching pedagogies, beginning in Initial Teacher Education and continuing throughout a teacher's career. Actions identified at the forum include:

- Develop and fund nature education professional development, particularly highlighting the multitude of cross-curricular and industry links from pharmacology to engineering, for teachers in Early Childhood, Primary and Post Primary settings, prioritising nature-based experiences.
- Support teachers to embed nature education in their pedagogy, with the opportunity to create connections with the wider community and other schools, through school funding grants, mentoring programmes and knowledge sharing networks.
- Incorporate nature education and ecological literacy as a specified requirement within Initial Teacher Education criteria for all teachers.
- Specify botany and ecology as core elements of Teaching Council curricular subject requirements for teachers of Science, Biology and Climate Action & Sustainable Development.
- Support school leaders to champion nature-focused education in their schools through appropriate policies and professional development.

Immersive nature education for all

Quality nature education requires regular outdoor experiences that engage all senses and create memorable connections with natural environments. In addition to student learning, research outlines the benefits outdoor experiences have on student well-being. Participants at the forum identified the following actions towards immersive nature education experiences for all learners:

- Support schools to develop or access dedicated outdoor spaces including, but not limited to, gardens, wildflower areas, ponds, and native plant habitats that can be managed by students, schools or by the local community.

- Develop partnerships between Local Authorities and schools to access local parks, nature reserves, and community spaces, particularly where school-based nature is limited. In this regard, equity of access should be considered, with children in socioeconomically disadvantaged urban areas who have less access to nature prioritised.
- Develop partnerships between National Parks and schools, ensuring an awareness of and care for local biodiversity through engagement with National Parks and Wildlife staff and local school communities.
- Encourage school projects that span the curricula such as growing food, creating pollinator areas, monitoring local biodiversity, and engaging in restoration projects.
- Encourage school campuses to be designed, developed or retrofitted with biodiversity and climate in mind. Projects can range from establishing pocket forests or pollinator gardens to building outdoor classrooms etc.
- Mandate significant green space allocation (e.g. minimum 30% of grounds) for new school buildings with native species focus, the potential for integrated outdoor classrooms, and planned nature routes throughout campuses.
- Appoint a dedicated Biodiversity Champion in each school, with administrative, caretaking and SNA staff as well as teachers eligible for this role.

Nature Education Across the Education Continuum

As outlined above, participants at the forum outlined that nature education should occur across the education continuum, through to third level education and beyond. Participants outlined that, alongside nature education and ecological literacy in the Early Childhood, Primary and Post-primary curricula:

- Third-level institutions should include more cross-curricular sustainability modules that take an integrated approach to nature education across disciplines, from engineering to accountancy.
- Adult and community education should provide ongoing opportunities through workplace training, community programmes, and informal learning networks.
- Parents should be encouraged to engage in nature education through schools and parents' associations to promote biodiversity awareness and ecological literacy with their children.
- A central location for nature education resources, research networks, and nature-based education organisations should be established. Regional education centres could serve as biodiversity 'hubs' supported by cluster systems.

Overcoming Challenges and Barriers

Participants recognised that a systematic resource commitment would be required in order to address challenges and barriers that might hinder the preparation of future generations to care for and protect nature. In order to depend on individual enthusiasm or short-term project funding participants identified the following actions:

- Ensure the Department of Education & Youth are involved with drafting and implementation of environmental policies, such as the National Biodiversity Action Plan.

- Ensure there is a coherence across educational policies in order to integrate and align the Nature Restoration Law into school improvement planning, inspector evaluations, and capital developments etc.
- Ensure dedicated funding streams for school nature spaces, allocated specifically for ecological education, with application processes that are straightforward and streamlined.
- Continue to support the revision of curricula and assessment to ensure that aspects, such as high-stakes exams, do not deter students from critically and meaningfully engaging in nature education.

Conclusion

As an island nation, the health of our ecosystems reflects the health of our citizens and our economy. Our unique biodiversity is intrinsically linked to our heritage, our language, and our identity. The nature restoration law provides a rich opportunity for Ireland's education system to encourage and support our young people to develop their ecological literacy and meet the environmental challenges of the future as stewards of our natural world. In order to support Ireland to meet its obligations and become a leader in nature protection, educational institutions, communities, and policymakers can work together toward shared environmental goals that transcend short-term political and economic pressures.