

# CHILDREN AND NATURE IN THE CITY

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## Changing schools, changing scene

How do children relate and interact with their natural and built environments? What opportunities are we, schools, and other groups, providing children with to help their encounters to be a positive and healthy – even enjoyable – experience?<sup>1</sup> My recent move from my very first school of St John's, Stanmore, in Harrow, to Woolmore School, Tower Hamlets, has re-kindled these fundamental questions and how we might approach these issues.

My first school is favoured by a grassy football pitch edged by native trees and a wild corner, within walking distance of The Corporation of London's Bentley Priory National Nature Reserve, including a deer park, ponds and woodland, and is a very short bus ride away from the Thames Valley Education Centre at Clay Lane. Though part of north London, it is very green suburban. The Tower Hamlets school, by contrast, is set in the very urban Poplar district, the school sited across the road from several high-rise estates. 'The city', with Canary Wharf's gleaming towers, marks out the skyline.

## Natural Spaces

To say there are no trees in Poplar would be grossly unfair – and incorrect. All Saints Church and the neighbouring estates en route to the school have trees and green spaces; the school itself has a green corner which is being developed. The area however has an 'urban' feel. How then do the children come to connect with nature? Opportunities are constantly being investigated and developed, both within and outside the school. Science, geography and maths lessons are held using all parts of the school grounds and neighbouring streets. Depending on the year group, classes undertake outings to the local Isle of Dogs Recycling Centre (KS2), Science Museum (KS2), Natural History Museum (KS1), London Zoo (KS1), and various parks/recreation grounds. Before school, there's a Breakfast Club with a real community atmosphere and a keep fit club which goes outside if the weather permits; after school, there's a free gardening and healthy eating club, giving hands-on experience of plants, animals, food, the local and wider worlds of both children and adults. To argue, as one might, that Tower Hamlets children have less than Harrow, because it is not 'visible' or close at hand, would again be flawed. Within easy travel distance of 'the city' are the Thames River, its Barrier, and Maritime Museum showcasing the story of humans and the environment, and the hands-on experiences of real nature from a disused space at Rainham Marshes.

Woolmore School, in Tower Hamlets, showing high rise flats and green corner, used by children for lessons and at playtimes, to the far right of the picture



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## Children Losing Touch with Nature?

I know a Londoner who has never set foot inside the British Museum; she has not had the desire or need. Creating this desire or need – appetite even – to connect with the natural world is something crucial to develop with, and for, children at an early age. A survey by the BBC's *Wildlife* magazine<sup>2</sup> and *The Independent*<sup>3</sup> asked 700 children to identify pictured flora and fauna, and found their responses much lower than expected or hoped for. Children also preferred to see friends or play on their computer than go for a walk or play outdoors or go to the countryside. In the United States, they call it 'nature deficit disorder'; I call it children missing out. Through the Learning Outside the Classroom<sup>4</sup> agenda and NAEF's own campaign to 'put the environment at the heart of the curriculum' we can continue to promote awareness, and not just to those with access to it.

## References:

1. <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/>
2. Are Children Losing Touch With The Wild? BBC Wildlife Magazine, August 2008. <http://www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com/>
3. Attenborough alarmed as children are left flummoxed by test on the natural world, Sarah Cassidy, Education Correspondent, The Independent, Friday, 1 August 2008 [www.independent.co.uk/.../attenborough-alarmed-as-children-are-left-flummoxed-by-test-on-the-natural-world-882624](http://www.independent.co.uk/.../attenborough-alarmed-as-children-are-left-flummoxed-by-test-on-the-natural-world-882624)
4. Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto: <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/resource-materials/outsideclassroom/>.

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