

Whatever the weather, students at The Nature School are encouraged to learn and play outdoors, and gumboots are a standard part of the school uniform according to the school's head teacher, Catherine Oehlman.

STORY BY CATH JOHNSEN PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSSELL SHAKESPEARE

Bush school

Nature-based schools are gaining momentum in Australia as more and more kids are swapping the classroom for the bush and proving that quality learning can take place in non-traditional settings.

THE CALLS OF honeyeaters, golden whistlers and whipbirds herald the start of the school day at The Nature School, as students in khaki and green uniforms trickle into bushland at Port Macquarie, on the New South Wales mid-north coast. As they arrive, the children drop their bags in favour of building a makeshift shelter, insurance against clouds threatening above. Head teacher and self-confessed bird nerd, Catherine Oehlman, is setting up a camp toilet while debating with a student about whether a hollowed-out termite mound in a nearby tree may be home to a kingfisher or kookaburra. “I’m a scientist!” another student declares, hovering over a jack jumper ant nest with a magnifying glass. “Look, Catherine – I made a new discovery!”



When learning outdoors, students manage their own belongings, carry their own equipment and are not timetabled by bells.

Once base camp is set up, the children wander through the bushland and make more discoveries: a discarded fish head suggests a white-bellied sea-eagle, a pile of scat has likely been left by an eastern grey kangaroo, and a koala is spotted resting in a gum tree. Clutching clipboards with paper and pencils, and with binoculars slung around their necks, the children stop frequently to record their findings. When they return to base camp, they run off to explore a natural moss garden, complete with muddy puddles for splashing in and Tarzan vines to swing from.

This is school, but not as we traditionally know it. Inspired by the long-standing traditions of European forest schools, the Australian bush school movement is fast gaining momentum. Breaking down many of the boundaries that are typically found in mainstream schools, bush schools offer a more integrated approach to subjects, timetables and even grade levels.

“The lines between inside and outside, learning and play, and teachers and students are all softer here at The Nature School,” says Catherine. “We learn wonderful things about the world, and importantly about our place in it. Oh, and we also climb trees, play in the rain, use tools, safely light fires, and get dirty. Most schools don’t offer that.”

Protecting and fostering a love of the environment, as well as allowing children to enjoy an unhurried childhood with plenty of time for outdoor exploration and experimentation, is at the heart of nature-based learning programs. “In response to the high-tech, hyper-scheduled world we find ourselves living in, parents are embracing these slow programs that allow children to be childlike,” says Catherine.

Lloyd Godson, co-founder of The Nature School and parent of a current student, Oliver, agrees. “The reason we started the school was because we wanted kids to feel connected to their natural world and understand they’re part of this huge picture; they’re a very small but important piece in the puzzle,” says Lloyd, the

Biosub man who was named the Australian Geographic Society’s 2007 Adventurer of the Year after he famously lived under water for more than two weeks in a steel container (see AG 87). “A lot of people think of The Nature School as a bunch of hippy kids running barefoot in the bush with no buildings, but it’s not. It’s about instilling a lifelong love of learning and encouraging kids to remain inquisitive and curious about the world around them.”

Catherine is also quick to debunk the “hippy school” perception. “Our primary school still has to be a real school,” she says. “We have to meet outcomes in English, science and geography, but the way we do that is by learning within nature and from nature.” And there are bricks and mortar classrooms at The Nature School, fittingly built with mud bricks made from the distinctive red soil found in the area. Inside, there’s a choice of sitting desks or standing desks as well as baskets overflowing with natural treasures – colourful feathers, bulging seed pods and smooth pebbles.

Yet Catherine says most of the time the classroom walls don’t exist, because their classroom is simply the world beyond. “We promote place-based education – learning where the child is – and for this little school it’s Port Macquarie and the places around here,” she says. “We have beach, we have bushland, we have lake areas, and so our classroom isn’t just within the walls of our building, it extends past the playground and beyond into the place that is Port Macquarie.”

ALITTLE FURTHER SOUTH, Dr Amanda Lloyd is an educator who studies and practices nature-based learning in beachside Gerringong, on the south coast of NSW. In a year-long study of mainstream primary school-aged children engaged in place-based, outdoor learning, Amanda monitored its effects on students’ learning, wellbeing and connection to local place. She found that regular outdoor lessons positively impacted children’s academic attainments, especially in terms of vocabulary development,

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Students of bush schools are learning not only through screens and books, but also in real life, and in real time.

The UK Forest School Association’s Six Key Principles

Australia doesn’t yet have guiding principles for bush schools and bush kindergartens. Many centres, however, draw inspiration from the six principles of the UK Forest School Association.

Principle 1

Forest School is a long-term process of frequent and regular sessions in a woodland or natural environment, rather than a one-off visit. Planning, adaptation, observations and reviewing are integral elements of Forest School.

Principle 2

Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural wooded environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.

Principle 3

Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.

Principle 4

Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.

Principle 5

Forest School is run by qualified practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.

Principle 6

Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for development and learning.

PHOTO CREDIT, BOTTOM: SHUTTERSTOCK



Anya Imhoff of Nature Play QLD says the bush kindergarten movement in Australia is booming, with bush kindies operating everywhere from the corner of school ovals to local beaches, and even in inner-city childcare centres with regular access to local parklands.



A typical day at Kindy Without Walls



8am: The children begin to arrive. During the colder months, they meet around the campfire, settle in and discuss the day ahead. They suggest ideas about what they'd like to do and together with the educators, come up with a flexible plan for the day. A risk assessment is then conducted – for example, if it's windy, educators will talk with the children about being careful of debris.

8.45am: A dadirri (mindful listening) session helps the children become more attuned with the environment before active play begins.

9am: Activities, as planned by the children, as well as free play

and exploration begin. Activities may include story building and telling; identification of plants, animals or insects; pattern making, sorting and classifying; or bush craft. The children have an open morning tea – they eat and drink when they feel hunger or thirst.

12pm: The children gather for lunch and enjoy an outdoor picnic together.

1pm: The children rest in outdoor hammocks. Some children will sleep, others will do quiet activities such as reading, reflecting and journalling, according to their natural rhythms.

2.15pm: Bush Kindy concludes.



Students in nature-based schools are included in the decision making and help shape the direction of learning, with the aim of creating learners that are intrinsically motivated, not externally impelled.

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meaningful writing and oral language skills. She also noted a profoundly positive impact on students' wellbeing.

"While outdoors, the class presented an increasing ability to regulate their own behaviours ensuring greater safety, responsibility, risk-management and independence," says Amanda. "Through regular outdoor interactions with their peers, children learnt valuable social skills; for example, turn-taking, leadership, compromise and sharing. As the year progressed, the class had formed interwoven friendships built on trust, fun, enjoyment, and care for each other."

Anya Imhoff, education coordinator for advocacy group Nature Play QLD and former forest school teacher in the UK, says she has witnessed the same outcomes in her teaching experiences. "In forest school or bush school, children are communicating and socialising in a different way because they're not restricted to a particular group or table," she says. "They're problem solving, they're working collaboratively and there's a multi-sensory approach to learning."

While the bush school movement in Australia has taken inspiration from the UK Forest School model (which was inspired by Scandinavian outdoor education models), Anya acknowledges that Australian schools must interpret these practices to suit local climates, environments and traditions.

"There are different challenges in Australia," she says, citing sun protection as an important consideration. "The heat makes it challenging, but everyone is managing it really well. We've even got a rainforest school that recently opened in tropical north Queensland."

MEANWHILE, ON THE OUTSKIRTS of sub-tropical Brisbane, the staff and students of Mount Nebo State School have been interpreting the principles of the forest school ethos in their own unique way. More and more, they are taking their learning outside.

While observing an English lesson, children carry their journals into the surrounding rainforest, settle themselves under a favourite tree and note down what they can see, hear and feel. "I can see the rough, textured bark on my tree; I can touch the damp ground; I can hear the repeated sounds of bell birds; I am calm," pencils one student.

"Today I can feel the light rain pattering down on my head. I can see the trees swaying in the wind and I can feel the damp grass brushing against me. I can see the ants scurrying around in the leaf litter below," writes another.

Often referred to as mindfulness, nature-based schools commonly practice dadirri – an Aboriginal term referring to the ancient art of mindful listening. At Kindy Without Walls, a bush kindergarten located within the leafy Mount Nebo State School grounds, a typical day will begin with dadirri.

"To make the principles of forest school relevant in an Australian context, it's important to incorporate first nation people's beliefs and understandings," says Emma Nall, teacher and co-founder of Kindy Without Walls. "We encourage the children to be aware of the country they stand on and pay respect to the people who were here first. And we try to pass on their knowledge around fauna and flora and bush tucker and how they use certain plants in certain ways."

Numerous mainstream schools are also seeing the benefits of teaching subjects such as maths and languages in the outdoors. Growing Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) gardens are another way of incorporating nature into learning.



One of the main tenets is allowing children to take supported risks.

"We talk about the practice of only taking what you need and how to ensure respectful, sustainable use of the land."

One of the main tenets of forest/bush school models is allowing children to take supported risks, appropriate to their environment and themselves.

At Mount Nebo State School, appropriate risk includes allowing the children to work together to build shelters and structures from tree branches and other natural resources. At Kindy Without Walls, it could be allowing children to cook spiced apples over the campfire or use simple tools.

"It's about encouraging the children to self-manage risk and ensuring they have the knowledge to do that safely," says Emma. "We generally find that the more you trust them, the more capable they are. The ability to self-manage risk as a three- or four-year-old is far more valuable than placing them into an astro-turfed environment where every danger has been removed."

Emma, who previously worked in traditional kindergarten settings, believes there can be more risk in mainstream centres than in outdoor, bush kindergartens.

"We've very much made a synthetic world, albeit with the best of intentions," she says. "We have removed the element of risk in children's lives so much that the children are not stimulated enough and so they seek out danger in order to challenge themselves." ▶

Lloyd Godson, high-school teacher and co-founder of The Nature School, says many students in traditional school settings have become increasingly disconnected from nature and are “over-schooled”.



Anya Imhoff from Nature Play QLD agrees. “It’s often said that the first risk a child takes is behind the wheel of a car,” she says. “We wouldn’t expose a child to a risk if there was no benefit to it, but learning to cross the road, climb trees, use tools and manage personal safety in a wild space – there are so many benefits to that.

“Educators are finding that injuries in a bush school or bush kindy program are minuscule in comparison to a typical playground environment, because children are being supported and empowered to manage risk for themselves.”

BACK AT THE NATURE SCHOOL in Port Macquarie, the children are taking some risks of their own. “We’re all about making it as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible,” says Catherine Oehlman. “We talk about how to light fires safely, how to use flint and steel, how to prepare an area before you make a fire, and to never put your back to the fire,” she adds. “We allow our children to use hand tools, hand drills, peelers for whittling timber and hand saws. We allow them to build structures, with ropes and timber, and we allow them to climb trees.”

More recently, The Nature School students have also been learning to use cameras to develop a field guide for their local area. “The kids are photographing the species that they see, such as the critically endangered swift parrots that perch in our trees, and also kangaroos, wallabies and koalas,” says Catherine. “Some students have caught my love of birds, while others are really interested in reptiles or wildflowers or even fungi. All sorts of interesting things live and breathe around here!”

The students are also learning the common and scientific names of the flora and fauna they encounter, as well as writing about the different species in their field guide, which will be printed and distributed to the local

community in the hope of encouraging species protection in the area. “We’ll give them to our local library, our local park ranger, the retirement village and local schools in our area and say, ‘Hey – did you know that we have these things in our area? You can look out for them too,’” she says. “This field guide will allow the children to have a voice in their own community.”

WHEN THEY’RE NOT BUSY being junior scientists or explorers, the students at The Nature School are occupied with simply being kids. Catherine calls a meeting around the log circle in the school grounds to determine which activity the students would like to do next. Some vote to play in the mud kitchen and the dense bamboo thicket, while others choose to make damper and cook it over an open fire.

Cows in an adjacent paddock look up slowly, munching on cud as they watch the kids prepare chocolate ‘mud’ cake in the dirt kitchen, decorated with native blossoms. Soon, an imaginary cafe is operating, and orders are being taken and fulfilled.

A discussion has also arisen around the campfire about food. One child declares damper with golden syrup to be his favourite food. “Well, I’m going to have tacos every day when I’m a dad. I love tacos!” chimes in another child. Catherine chuckles and surveys the scene. “If you give a child four planks of wood, some rope and a tyre, they can make a ship, it can be a fort, they can make a kitchen, it can be a cafe, it can be a hospital. Suddenly it opens all these possibilities,” she says, while rescuing a student’s rather well-done damper from the fire.

“It’s great to see some traditional schools now embracing nature play within their playgrounds, such as creating spaces with loose parts so that children have more opportunities to play,” she says, adding that other schools are taking children out of their classrooms and into nature for short periods of time to enhance their critical and creative thinking skills. “I would encourage more schools to do that and not think that nature is ‘too hard’ or decide that ‘we’re not that kind of school’. I’d encourage my colleagues in more traditional school contexts to think about how they can learn from the Australian bush school movement and ensure that every Australian child has access to beautiful natural spaces as part of their learning.”

Anya agrees and says that more and more schools are getting on board. “Lots of primary schools are now starting to implement nature play spaces – big loose piles of sticks, rocks and all those things we used to take for granted when we played outside as kids – with huge benefits from that in terms of behaviour and concentration in class,” she says.

Catherine is eager to see what long-term outcomes there are for students experiencing this progressive schooling style. “I’m so interested to see where our students will go as learners, how self-directed they’ll be, and how it will influence learning outcomes,” she says.

“We want our kids to be happy, curious, inquisitive learners, because we know this will colour the rest of their lives and careers. I fear that primary schools have become mini high schools. We need to fiercely protect the childhood years and acknowledge that they don’t stop at [age] five but easily go through to [age] 12. Let’s not just prepare our children for high school, let’s prepare our children for life.”

It’s not only about learning outcomes. Nature or bush schools also emphasise letting kids explore their surrounds, including nature’s wonders such as a bird’s nest (below right).



Lots of primary schools are now starting to implement nature play, with huge benefits.



◀ **Catherine Oehlman** believes that collaboration among Australian educators is important in the emerging area of nature pedagogy. “Our school systems are highly regulated – and for good reason – but at the same time, there’s the challenge in getting more progressive approaches implemented in our schools.”