Scottish rewilding estate hosts pioneering research into nature and mental health

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Rural school pupils visiting Trees for Life's Dundreggan rewilding estate near Loch Ness have been helping shape a pioneering nature-based research programme to boost young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Working alongside researchers from the University of South Wales (USW), pupils from Highland schools have been exploring how spending time in nature can improve wellbeing, help young people cope with difficult times, and support the mental health of those living in remote and rural communities.

Many young people face poor mental wellbeing, because of issues including exam stress, bullying, body image worries, and climate anxiety, say the researchers. Rural school students also experience infrastructure and social barriers, including isolation.

Healthy Young Minds is a nature-based early-intervention programme involving researchers at USW, University of the Highlands and Islands, and Dundee University. It involves high school students aged 11-14 years old co-producing activities to support the wellbeing of young people.

As part of the initiative, this spring, two groups of children from Farr and Kinlochleven High Schools visited Trees for Life's Dundreggan Rewilding Centre in Glenmoriston. The young people took part in a guided rewilding walk and pond dipping activity, and learned about tree identification, bannock bread making, and traditional fire lighting.

During workshops facilitated by Ewen's Room, a Highland mental health charity, they generated ideas for outdoor activities to boost mental wellbeing, including camping, outdoor cafés, fire-building, family activities, hill walking, wild swimming, beach combing, sports, board games, and natural crafts.

Each idea received feedback from other young people and experts on green health and young people's mental health. The young people finalised their ideas and then voted for their favourite activities.

Mental health challenges often arise in early adolescence, and the project's intention is to promote wellbeing through engagement with nature and local greenspaces.

Franny Schlicke, Trees for Life's Visitor Experience and Operations Supervisor at Dundreggan, said: "Supporting young people's mental health is so important, and it was wonderful to see the students enjoying the nature-rich landscape here, and engaging in the activities and discussions.

"This research project highlights why everyone should have the opportunity to get out into nature, to enjoy its health and wellbeing benefits, and see for themselves why it needs protecting and restoring."

As part of the research process, the young people learned about five ways to wellbeing – connecting with other people, learning new skills, giving to others, being physically active, and taking notice of the little things.

Dr Sara Bradley, Senior Research Fellow at USW, said: "Our project is enabling young people to come up with their own ideas on how nature can support their health and wellbeing. It was inspiring for the team and students to be able to visit Dundreggan's excellent Rewilding Centre and its stunning wild landscape as part of this.

"Co-creating with young people is a very important and effective way to engage them in tackling challenges. The project has created opportunities for addressing mental health difficulties in a preventative way through being outdoors and accessing nature."

Since taking part, students reported that they now see nature as important for their mental health, they go outside more, and they think about other people more.

The Healthy Young Minds team is now preparing two papers for publication in academic journals, and working to secure additional funding. The team will keep in touch with the schools to explore developing and implementing the nature-based activities designed by the pupils.

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Healthy Young Minds has been developed in partnership with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (NHS Highland), Ewen's Room, and young people's charity Kinlochlovin'. It is supported by Trees for Life and the Highland Green Health Partnership, and funded by the Medical Research Council.

Important fragments of Scotland's globally unique Caledonian forest have been expanding and flourishing, and wildlife thriving, at Dundreggan since rewilding charity Trees for Life purchased the estate almost 20 years ago.

Dundreggan is home to over 4,000 plants and animals species, many of which are rare and protected. Dundreggan Rewilding Centre offers year-round events and activities, accessible forest trails, a café and events space, a storytelling bothy, outdoor natural play area, and purpose-built accommodation with 20 bedrooms and up to 40 beds.

Rewilding is about restoring nature's remarkable web of life – including habitats, natural processes, and native missing species including red squirrels and beavers – and supporting communities and local livelihoods.

See visitdundreggan.co.uk for more details.

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Company Contact:

Trees for Life

T. 07753 488146
E. richardbunting@gmail.com
W. https://www.treesforlife.org.uk

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