

Opening speech

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Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you all to Dunkeld in the Scottish Highlands.

Scotland's scenery attracts visitors from all over the world and nowhere more so than here in Dunkeld. Not only is this forest landscape stunningly beautiful: the area is also steeped in a rich history, an abundant natural history and plenty of literary connections as well.

I know that we have a varied audience here; teachers, rangers, and foresters – all with an interest in the science of forest education. So let's take a brief look at our educational tradition and how it connects with the forests of Scotland.

This country has a long history of innovation in education and learning. In the 18th century Scotland played a significant role in the Age of Enlightenment – that outburst of intellectual and scientific endeavour that enabled scientists and philosophers like James Hutton, Adam Smith and David Hume to flourish.

Scotland was also home to Sir Patrick Geddes – widely held as the originator of the concept of sustainability, and whose ideas we are carrying forward in our vision for creating a Central Scotland Green Network.

Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 from the 1992 Earth Summit report reminds us that “Education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address environment and development issues.”

Today, we are 20 years on from the first Earth Summit and much has happened in Scotland since then. I would like to outline briefly where we stand with education now and how this relates to sustainable development, climate change and – in particular – forest pedagogy.

Over the last few years there has been a seismic shift in how education is approached in Scottish Schools with the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence. For our 3 to 18 year olds, the Scottish education system aims to develop: successful learners, effective contributors, responsible citizens and confident individuals.

These ambitions chime well with UNESCO's 4 pillars of education: that is, learning to know; learning to do; learning to be, and learning to live together.

Taking Learning into the outdoors is a key component in delivering our Curriculum for Excellence.

When children go outside to learn, they make better connections about the world around them and are more physically active.

For Scotland this is hugely important. Many people are largely disconnected with the natural world for a variety of reasons, not least that four out of every five Scots live in urban areas. For city dwellers to understand and appreciate climate change and sustainable development at first hand, contact with the natural world around them is essential.

Many people feel they need to come to beautiful places, like Dunkeld, to make contact with the natural world.

There is obviously some truth in this – but in fact the natural world is all around us. Working with our partners - the Forest Education Initiative and Living Classrooms – we in Forestry Commission Scotland are keen to encourage the use of the natural world on our doorstep.

For example, last month I visited a small area of woodland – perhaps only 1000 square metres – that lies under the walls of Edinburgh Castle and is used by a city nursery for small groups of young children to visit and explore – in all weathers!

Together, with our partners we are encouraging more outdoor learning: in the playground, in local greenspace and in woodlands close to schools.

We have introduced Forest Schools and Forest Kindergartens to Scotland. The Forest Education Initiative encourages cluster groups to deliver local learning about trees, woods and forests; and Living Classrooms are promoting nature kindergartens and helping people to take learning - in all of its diverse forms - outside.

I believe that these initiatives provide excellent examples of the theme for this conference: Successful Partnership working for Sustainable Development Education.

It is also, perhaps, worth reminding ourselves why forests are such great places for learning...

They provide shelter.

They offer a wealth of learning opportunities.

Above all, they are places that inspire.

We and our partners are working with the Education Sector to promote the use of Woods for Learning, encouraging teachers to take their pupils out into the woods.

What better place to put maths into context?

I can still remember my first lessons in trigonometry which were based on going outside to try to measure the height of a tree and the width of a river.

Or to learn about biodiversity, or to inspire art?

Gaining an understanding about local woods also help children make better connections with some of the wider challenges facing the world's forests: as it were, thinking globally and acting locally,

We are lucky in Scotland that around 90% of all schools are within a kilometre of a local area of woodland - so on paper at least the opportunities are there to make use of greenspaces for education. .

Taking learning into the woods is not, of course, without its problems - but there are huge rewards for doing so.

Understanding risks and being able to assess risks – continually asking the question “what if?” - are fundamental life skills. And yet we hear that young people in this country are often constrained, lacking the freedom to explore the natural world on their doorstep.

Taking learning into a forest - especially if parent helpers are present - can be an education for everyone, helping to appreciate and deal with risk.

So, what are we doing in Scotland to take forward forest pedagogy?

Together with our partners, we are helping teachers to gain confidence in taking their pupils into local woods and greenspace to deliver the Curriculum for Excellence.

Through our Woods for Learning Strategy and Action Plan, we are providing a focus for the forestry and educational sectors, emphasising the importance of trees in relation to wider global challenges, such as climate change and sustainable development.

Through our Forest Research Agency, we are helping to collate evidence supporting the difference that forest pedagogy makes to children's health and learning attainment levels.

And through collaborative working, resources are being developed to support teachers and others who are taking learning outside and into the woods.

A good example of this resource material is 'Forests for the Future' - a learning pack we have produced in partnership with the Crown Estates and the Royal Highland Education Trust.

Meanwhile, the Forest School movement continues to grow in Scotland, and we are fortunate in being able to continue to offer funding for the Forest School Scotland Co-ordinator, - in partnership with the Forest Education Initiative and Living Classrooms..

Although some might regard time spent in the woods and under the trees as a welcome escape from the modern digital world, there are also opportunities to apply technology to enhance teaching and learning as it relates to the natural world.

A major new initiative in Scotland, supported by LIFE funding, is Scotland's Environment Web. This is a website that brings together environmental data and describes the state of Scotland's environmental protection. It provides quick links to trends and indicators. It provides a link to Scotland's Greenspace Map which allows anyone to plug in a postcode and get an instant map of local greenspace. And there are plans to develop shared space for Citizen Science, and an app for pupils to monitor their local environment.

The Forest Education Initiative Facebook page is also there to help users to find out about learning in woods.

Looking ahead, we are keen to develop these kind of communication tools, linking in with the IT developments that are taking place in Scotland's schools.

Ladies and gentlemen, this Congress provides us all with a tremendous opportunity to share and explore examples of best practice, to explore recent research and to make new contacts – or refresh old contacts – so that we can learn from each other.

We know that the history of humanity is intertwined with forests and trees. They remain critical for us all, not least as a source of oxygen and a store for carbon. Forests are also home to 300 million people around the world, and for many more of the world's poorest people forests provide essential sources of fuel, food, water and medicine.

I believe it has never been as important as now to help people – of all ages - understand the relationships between sustainable development, climate change and the world's trees, woods and forests.