

# Out of office – Using nature connection to supercharge your sustainability strategy



Against the backdrop of increasingly dire evidence about the climate and ecological emergency, not all businesses recognise the opportunity presented by integrating sustainability into their strategies and into their culture.

Connecting teams with nature can help to root these strategies in the natural world and provide a perspective from which employees can make more sustainable decisions. In the coming decade, businesses will need to be more ambitious with their sustainability goals in order to survive. Nature connection helps to put the staff team at the heart of these strategies and can lead to better staff happiness and retention.

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*“No One Will Protect What They Don’t Care About; And No One Will Care About What They Have Never Experienced”*

David Attenborough

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# 1

## Introduction

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The 2015 Paris Accord marked a breakthrough of international cooperation in response to climate change. Signs of a significant shift in the corporate world were shown by public commitments to integrate sustainability in to business strategy. The CEO of the largest asset manager in the world – Larry Fink of Blackrock – made the bold statement that any company that doesn’t integrate sustainability into its strategy will no longer be recommended to investors; a potential divestment of around \$6tn (US).

However, by early 2020 this progress stalled as the world faced the first global pandemic for 100 years. Two years later Russia invaded Ukraine and we face new crises of energy, food and international security. Recent heatwaves have now brought a sudden realisation that the climate emergency is also very firmly with us today – not a problem to solve some time in the future.

At Earthwatch, we are clear that our role is to actively help our partners – in business and wider society – to integrate sustainability into business strategy. This means their financial success is linked directly to the

value creation that flows from how they manage their social and environmental impact. The complexities of how to define and operationalise an integrated sustainability strategy needs the engagement of staff at all levels. A key way of achieving this is to make sustainability real, present and very personal.

At Earthwatch, we believe that a key part of embedding sustainability successfully in a business strategy and operations is through improving employee nature connection. Bold sustainability strategies and engaged staff team can transform the way businesses interact with the planet. Our business transformation team, Earthwatch Learning, works with business partners to design and deliver transformational learning, grounded in immersive experiences. We use dynamic learning techniques that draw on science and are rooted in nature. We believe in actively engaging with employees at all levels of an organisation, building the understanding and action needed to bring about profound change in their business and meet sustainability goals.

### What is Nature Connection?

Nature connection is a psychological concept that describes the way we relate to, and experience, nature. It refers to the kind of relationship we develop with the natural world. Studies show that disconnection from nature has been a route cause of unsustainability. This separation from nature has enabled us to dominate, degrade and exploit nature to the detriment of the environment, our businesses, communities and our own mental wellbeing.

A 2022 study showed that Britain is bottom of 14 European nations for nature connection as well as for biodiversity, having lost more wildlife than any other G7 country and shown to be one of the most nature-depleted countries on the planet. <sup>1</sup>

**In this paper, the team at Earthwatch Learning explore how you can best motivate your staff to deliver your sustainability goals and how learning that is rooted in nature connection can create a culture of sustainability in your business.**

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<sup>1</sup> [Country-level factors in a failing relationship with nature: Nature connectedness as a key metric for a sustainable future | SpringerLink](#)

## 2

# Thriving, not just surviving – business resilience in a changing climate

The largest challenge facing businesses over the coming decades will be the impact of the ecological emergency and climate change. Limiting the global rise in temperatures to 1.5 degrees, as defined in the UN Paris Climate Accords, is becoming increasingly difficult and businesses are having to adapt to dramatic climate impacts in the near and medium term. The World Economic Forum Risks Report 2022 lists extreme weather and climate action failure as the two greatest risks facing global economies over the next 10 years. These risks in turn have knock-on effects for global socio-political unrest.

Against this stark backdrop, businesses are having to plan their own sustainability and mitigation strategies.

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*“We have [less than] two business cycles to transform every sector of the global economy to halve global emissions. Put simply, we are in the pivotal decade”.*

Dr Celine Herweijer  
HSBC Group Chief Sustainability Officer

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Businesses have a pivotal role to play as active agents in the drive to create sustainable, decarbonised economies. There is huge opportunity for institutions to become determined enablers, and catalysts, of a climate-smart economic transition.

Businesses operate under a social licence both with their customers and with their employees. Increasingly, climate impact is being considered as part of that social licence. Businesses that want to retain customers and, crucially, attract and retain talent should be creating impactful sustainability strategies. In a study by Anthesis in 2021 53% of the UK’s workforce said sustainability is an important factor in choosing a company to work for.<sup>2</sup> Sustainability should not simply be a metric of decarbonisation but a holistic business response to preserve organisational functionality and employee wellbeing – both physical and mental.

Nature connection can be the enduring link between business strategy and sustainability culture. By exploring the challenge of business sustainability through the lens of employee nature connection, organisations can transition from being a reactive or inactive force to being a proactive catalyst for positive environmental change.

### Case study – Vera

Vera, a Community Relations Coordinator based in Nigeria, participated in an India-based learning programme with Earthwatch. The sustainability leadership curriculum helps focus employees on learning outcomes directly relevant to her business. Whilst in India, Vera supported field research on the impacts of fragmentation, degradation and climate change on forests and their associated human and wildlife communities. As Vera lives in the middle of a highly populated city, this experience gave her the rare opportunity to reconnect with nature: “The experience... was life-changing. I learned how to appreciate nature and the environment better, and understand that I can play a role to preserve and protect the environment”.

The experience increased Vera’s knowledge of issues related to environment and sustainability, and provided her with the confidence to be more proactive in her approach to work. The programme has also helped Vera make positive changes to how her team members communicate with one another: “I have learned to say, ‘OK, we had this activity yesterday, what could we have done better? What do you think we can do to help the business going forward? It’s helped me to plan and also look out for unexpected issues or incidents.”

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<sup>2</sup> Sustainability key to attracting and retaining workers study finds - Anthesis ([anthesisgroup.com](https://anthesisgroup.com))



### 3

## Seeing the wood for the trees – using nature to understand business sustainability goals and motivate transformation



Numerous studies have shown that nature connection directly impacts on an individual's desire to protect the environment.<sup>3</sup> Put simply, people care more about the environment and make more sustainable decisions if they feel connected to the natural world around them. When applied to a sustainability strategy this means that your staff team will be more committed to delivering your organisation's sustainability goals if they feel connected to the natural world around them.

All businesses and their employees operate in the natural world. Businesses are part of an interdependent relationship with the natural world where they have an impact on it and in turn are

affected by changes within it. Increasingly, we exist in a VUCA world:

- **Volatile**
- **Uncertain**
- **Complex**
- **Ambiguous**

Things change quickly and uncertainty is the new normal. Organisational change can be messy and complex and create anxiety and uncertainty among colleagues. Nature, and natural resilience thinking can help employees make sense of the complex business world by using natural metaphors as a thinking tool to consider business problems. Natural metaphors can be used to explain complex topics such as carbon cycles, carbon stocks and stranded assets.

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<sup>3</sup> (Evans et al., 2018. Nisbet et al, 2009, Tam 2013)

## RESILIENCE THINKING

Earthwatch uses Resilience Thinking to help business leaders re-consider challenges facing the business world. The seven principles for building resilience in social-ecological systems, originally coined by the Stockholm Resilience Centre, investigate how interacting systems of people and nature can best be managed. The approach to Resilience Thinking is broken down into seven principles:

### Maintain diversity and redundancy

Systems with many different components are generally more resilient than systems with few components. Systems with multiple components have an in-built insurance - components can compensate for the loss or failure of others.

### Manage connectivity

Connectivity can be both a good and a bad thing. Well-connected systems can recover from disturbances more quickly, but overly connected systems may lead to rapid spread of disturbances.

### Manage slow variables and feedbacks

Managing slow variables and feedbacks is often crucial to make sure ecosystems produce essential services. If these systems shift into a different configuration or regime, it can be extremely difficult to reverse. Feedbacks are the two-way 'connectors' between variables that can either reinforce (positive feedback) or dampen (negative feedback) change.

### Foster complex adaptive systems thinking

A complex adaptive systems (CAS) approach means accepting that within a social-ecological system, several connections are occurring at the same time on different levels. It also means accepting

unpredictability and uncertainty, and acknowledging a multitude of perspectives.

### Encourage learning

Social-ecological systems are always in development so there is a constant need to revise existing knowledge and stimulate learning. More collaborative processes can also help.

### Broaden participation

There are a range of advantages to a broad and well-functioning participation. An informed and well-functioning group have the potential to build trust and a shared understanding - both fundamental ingredients for collective action.

### Promote polycentric governance

Polycentricity, a governance system in which multiple governing bodies interact to make and enforce rules within a specific policy arena or location, is considered to be one of the best ways to achieve collective action in the face of disturbance and change. It represents flexible solutions for self-organisations where more formal procedures seem to fail. A key to successful polycentric governance is to keep the network together and maintain a tight structure, which goes beyond information sharing and ad hoc collaboration.

**The natural world and its ecosystems can provide powerful, experiential learning tools which can be used to create robust sustainability strategies for businesses. The relationship between business and the natural world can be used to deconstruct and reconsider the problems facing both.**



# 4

## Naturally good learning – nature connection for improved learning

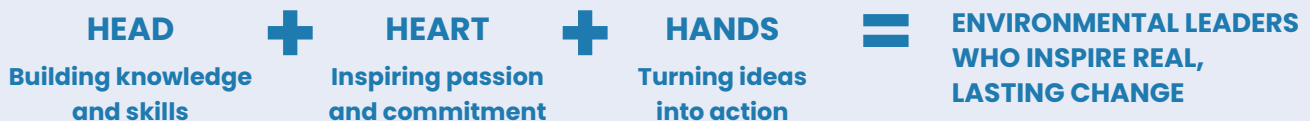
Research has shown that contact with nature can contribute to individual wellbeing such improvements in mood, cognition, and health. A related concept is the idea of 'nature connectedness' – an experiential connection with the natural environment. In *The relationship between nature connectedness and happiness*, Capaldi et al assert "Subjective nature connectedness is a strong predictor of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours that may also be positively associated with subjective well-being".<sup>4</sup>

Time spent in nature and its associated nature connection helps to embed sustainability learning in teams. The physical and mental wellbeing benefits of time in nature help to connect your staff teams with your business sustainability challenges and with their colleagues.

The natural world can also provide a more effective learning space than the traditional classroom or meeting room. Research has shown that learning in nature can reduce stress, rejuvenate attention spans and can boost self-discipline. Natural spaces provide a supportive context for learning – greener environments are found to be calmer and quieter and foster warmer interpersonal relationships. In a study by Kuo et al, it was found that 'experiences of nature boost academic learning, personal development, and environmental stewardship' and that nature learning 'indicates shifts in perseverance, problem solving, critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, and resilience'.

### Head, Heart, Hands

The Head, Heart and Hands Model illustrates the importance of appealing to the head, heart and hands of organisational members when designing learning programmes.



This model can be particularly useful when designing sustainability strategies as it considers the motivation factors of your staff team.

**Time spent in nature will have a positive impact on your staff team, helping them to shape their thinking about sustainability and creating lasting connections with nature and with their colleagues.**

# 5

## Whole person learning – developing people, not job roles to drive a sustainable business culture



Organisations are made up of a rich patchwork of people. Each job role is undertaken by a unique individual with a range of interests, experiences, concerns and values about the natural world. The culture and values of an organisation are lived through the behaviours and mindset of the staff team. The business culture helps them understand what actions are considered appropriate and in turn it affects day-to-day business operations on both conscious and unconscious levels. For a sustainability strategy to endure, it should become a sustainability *culture*.

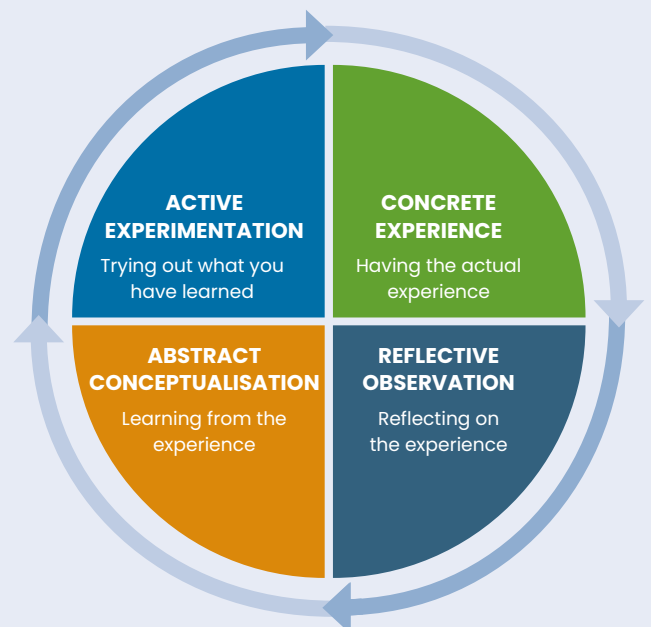
Whole person learning sees the human being as existing in a network of relationships, interconnecting arrangements and interdependent systems. The Whole Person Learning approach seeks to:

- bring together the individual’s context with an understanding of the nature of personhood.
- create learning tasks chosen in collaboration with the learner to enhance their development toward the goal of a more complete personhood.
- foster and live in practice a more responsible engagement with the nature of effective participation in the human order and the planetary sphere.

### Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle

Earthwatch’s nature-based, experiential whole-person learning draws on work by David Kolb. Kolb’s experiential learning theory includes a four-stage cycle of learning, reinforcing Kolb’s argument that “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”.

- 1. Concrete Experience** - the learner encounters a concrete experience. This might be a new experience or situation, or a reinterpretation of existing experience in the light of new concepts.
- 2. Reflective Observation of the New Experience** - the learner reflects on the new experience in the light of their existing knowledge. Of particular importance are any inconsistencies between experience and understanding.
- 3. Abstract Conceptualization** - reflection gives rise to a new idea, or a modification of an existing abstract concept (the person has learned from their experience).
- 4. Active Experimentation** - the newly created or modified concepts give rise to experimentation. The learner applies their idea(s) to the world around them to see what happens.



Incorporating whole person learning into the workplace means investing in effective, achievable development. Whole person learning builds a high-trust environment at work and clearly illustrates to your staff team that they are more than just a job title.

Whole person learning is particularly appropriate for examining the challenges of sustainability as it recognises that climate and ecological crisis is something facing your staff team outside their working environment as well as through the business. By taking a whole person learning approach, you will build trust within your staff teams and catalyse a proactive transition towards a culture of sustainability.



## 6

# Conclusion – using natural learning to transform to a sustainable culture



Our experience shows that learning models that utilise the natural environment are the most effective way of both embedding sustainability into your business strategies, and translating existing strategies into tangible action and results. Our learning philosophy is to bring people away from the office into a neutral and inspiring environment: to remove hierarchies and promote more cooperative behaviour across business culture, and to promote more creative thinking, viewing priorities differently, embracing diversity in all its forms, approaching tasks in a new way.

Our programmes demystify science, regulation and policy. By developing an understanding of the science behind the response to global challenges participants can experience the interconnectedness of our natural system, society and economy. Through experiencing ourselves and our organisations as part of the wider system, our responses also tend to be

connected to our stakeholders and wider society. This drives creative and innovative problem solving and solutions, that align commercial advantage with planetary health.

Our programmes are unique due to their immersive and emotive nature. Using commercial and ecological expert input, personal reflection, action learning and inquiry processes and nature-based experiential learning, participants develop the motivation, agency and skills to become impassioned sustainability advocates and leaders. Through enabling participants to explore their own purpose and define what they need to take ownership and responsibility for, participants feel empowered to drive the transition required within their part of the system. This can catalyse behavioural and organisational transitions from within, that align to global frameworks and help create systemic change.

## Earthwatch Learning pathways

### NATURE CONNECTEDNESS

- Use nature and natural symbolism to deepen understanding of sustainability concepts such as climate risk, ecosystem collapse, resilience and regeneration.
- Promote sensory engagement with nature.
- Enable emotional connection to, and compassion for, nature.
- Offer personal experiences in beautiful locations to improve a sense of well-being and offer a memorable experience.
- Develop insight into how people, businesses and society rely on natural systems.

### EXPLORING PERSONAL VALUES & BELIEFS

- Broaden horizons through exposure to different perspectives on nature, why it matters, and how humans should interact with it.
- Promote thinking systemically & critically.
- Offer cross-cultural exposure to a diverse range of people.
- Involvement in a model of strong environmental values and beliefs in action.
- Instil a sense of agency & belief that their actions can make a difference.
- Space & support to make sense of the above.

### BUILDING ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE

- Develop understanding of nature and ecosystems and the interaction between humans & the natural world.
- Develop appreciation for how breakdown of these systems will affect our environment, society and economy.
- Promote appreciation for the scientific method in understanding our natural world.

### INSPIRING PURPOSEFUL VISION & ACTION

- Encourage “dreaming” of what a sustainable world could be like.
- Fostering the motivation to commit to an action plan.
- Offer spaces for collaborating with colleagues and stakeholders to find the most impactful course of action.
- Support in making and delivering an action plan, promoting an action learning approach.

Our Learning Team have worked with business from many different sectors to help them re-think the challenge of sustainability. We deliver bespoke learning packages to help businesses become a force for good in society and to thrive in an uncertain future.

**Put simply, the best way to address the challenges found in the office is to get out of the office and back into nature.**

# Meet the Earthwatch team

Our learning programmes are conducted by experts in their field and enable you to quickly upskill your team or organisation

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## **Abi Jermain**

### Senior Learning Manager

Abi has consulted on, designed and delivered a wide variety of experiential learning programmes for partners such as HSBC, Shell, Microsoft and DHL. Through her design work Abi embraces the opportunity that Earthwatch programmes allow, blending knowledge sharing, reflection, networking and coaching towards action. Abi has trained as a co-active coach and Action Learning facilitator and co-leads a team of learning managers.



## **Scott Bearman-Brown**

### Senior Learning Manager

Scott co-leads on the design and delivery of leadership, coaching and experiential learning programmes for Earthwatch's Corporate Partnerships. Scott has spent 18 years consulting on senior leadership development, facilitation, coaching, strategy workshops and team engagement with clients such as HSBC, Metro Bank, BMW, Manchester United, Thames Water, as well as global leaders in travel, aviation, utilities and education. Over the last seven years he has focussed primarily on sustainability leadership. Scott is an accredited Insights® Practitioner and coach and holds a distinction in Learning Practice from the CIPD.

Earthwatch works with business partners to design and deliver transformational sustainability approaches, grounded in immersive experiences and dynamic learning techniques that draw on science and are rooted in nature.

Earthwatch Learning actively engages employees at all levels of an organisation in the understanding and action needed to bring about profound change in their business and meet sustainability goals.

See your business in a new light. Explore our Earthwatch Learning offer on our website [learning.earthwatch.org.uk](https://learning.earthwatch.org.uk) and get in touch to speak to us about what Earthwatch Learning can do for you by emailing [development@earthwatch.org.uk](mailto:development@earthwatch.org.uk)

## References and further reading

[World Economic Forum Global Risks Report](#)

[Applying resilience thinking](#)

[The Nature Relatedness Scale: Linking Individuals' Connection With Nature to Environmental Concern and Behavior – Nisbet et al.](#)

[Country-level factors in a failing relationship with nature: Nature connectedness as a key metric for a sustainable future | SpringerLink](#)

[Frontiers | Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Converging Evidence of a Cause-and-Effect Relationship \(frontiersin.org\)](#)

[Sustainability key to attracting and retaining workers study finds – Anthesis \(anthesisgroup.com\)](#)

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