A new GCSE in natural history will teach children about wildlife – and they want to learn, says Mary Colwell

Research for the family activity app Hoop in August 2019 revealed that under a quarter of children between the ages of five and 15 can name a robin or a badger, less than half can identify a stinging nettle and a whopping 82 per cent failed to recognise a bumblebee.

This lack of engagement with the natural world is not only a tragedy for the children, who are missing out on fascination and wonder, but it also points to a deep failure in our education system. For this reason, I have lobbied for more than a decade for a qualification in natural history.

It’s possible to go through school, taking biology at GCSE and A level, and barely go outside. The Field Studies Council, which runs practical, outdoor classes for biology, geography and ecology courses, reports a steady decrease in the number of learner hours spent doing outside science.

For some science students the biology A level field course – which is just, on average, three days – will be their only opportunity to be involved in fieldwork throughout their whole formal science education, from five to 18 years old. We are educating future generations to be students of the virtual world rather than practitioners in the visceral, real one.

If you live in a city, you are likely to have been disrupted by Extinction Rebellion, a ground-up movement of mainly young people who want to change the way we live on the planet to stop catastrophic climate change and loss of biodiversity.

Deep concern

Whatever you think of their activities, it shows there is deep concern about the state of our planet. Those same protesters are the ones who say they are let down by the school system. Many feel that what they learn at their desks is not sufficient for the challenges they know they will face.

I think they are right. How can we expect future decision-makers to create wise policies and take tough decisions if the natural world is a mystery? If wildlife is a nameless mass of animals and plants and the intricacies of their needs are unknown, how will we act to protect them?

But young people do want to know more. BBC statistics show that more primary and secondary-age children watched Blue Planet II than The X Factor being shown at the same time on another channel. The recent Seven Worlds, One Planet series attracted a 63 per cent increase in the five-to-35-years age group category compared with the average for that time slot.

The Field Studies Council reports that 77 per cent of young people questioned want more outdoor lessons – they want to know what things are, understand how they function and get out to study them. How do we plug this vast gap between...
the essence of election pulled all petitions. The official response generated again with a petition that quickly through the system. In 2017, I tried told it didn’t have a chance of getting and I, fizzled out as I was repeatedly This generated some interest but it, as chairman of Natural England — Juniper — before his current position. In 2011, I talked about it with Tony Petition been part of the curriculum for years. biology is taught, natural history has been sidelined. Biology is the science of life — the mechanisms and systems that support this living planet. Natural history is the study of life itself — the plants, birds, fungi, insects, mammals and amphibians that make up the nature of Britain. American environmentalist David Schmidley said: “A naturalist is the person who is inexhaustibly fascinated by biological diversity and who does not view organisms merely as models, or vehicles for theory, but rather as the thing itself that excites our admiration and our desire for knowledge, understanding, and preservation.”

“It will help the next generation to be more connected to the natural world”

Biology and natural history are complementary but distinct subjects. Over time, biological science has become mainstream and the study of natural history a niche hobby. This is a pity on so many levels.

A natural historian requires unique skills, namely those of identification, long-term monitoring and data collection. People whose livelihoods depend on a relationship with the natural world know this, of course — the farmers, gamekeepers, and land managers of the UK.

Those whose lives are lived outdoors physically feel the nature of Britain every day. Even so, it will benefit the next generation of youngsters taking up these careers to be more connected to the natural world. Students have to work outside and learn to make sense of the messy data that is the product of the real world. They must observe and interpret what they see in a broad context and get to know their locality, as well as make the connection between British wildlife and the rest of the world.

Crucially, in this qualification, they will also study the connection between nature and culture — the natural world as a source of inspiration and creativity in art, literature and music throughout time.

Mental health

There will be both science and emotional connectivity. As there is a strong connection between studying nature and benefits to mental health, a contribution to addressing the serious concerns over youth depression and anxiety is there, too.

As author of Silent Spring, Rachel Carson wrote: “Those who contemplate the beauty of the Earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature.”

The GCSE in natural history is being developed by the exam board OCR and inching ever closer to becoming a reality (News, 15 January). On a personal level it has been a long and painfully slow journey, but the end is in sight. Perhaps, and there are many issues to address, it will mark the change in the fortunes of nature in society. By putting it into the heart of all schools, where everyone can study it, children in inner cities as well as the countryside can learn the importance of wildlife of the UK.

It cannot and should not only be available to the privileged or those who happen to know someone to pass on their knowledge. It could happen as early as 2021, more likely 2022, but whenever it appears in schools, it won’t be a moment too soon.