

Green Guidance Counselling: Working with Nature in Mind



In this article, John O'Donoghue brings a splash of 'Green' to Guidance. John brings the natural environment into focus and links the importance of nature with career theory. In this way, John links Guidance with promoting sustainable development and change which was the focus of NCGEs National Forum on Guidance in October 2020.

From teabags to tech giants the world is adjusting, embracing and innovating when it comes to greening their industries; perhaps now is the time for guidance counsellors to do the same? With the help of Greta Thunberg, green consciousness is alive like never before and particularly in a generation of younger people. This will no doubt, play an important role in shaping how they want to live and work. Guidance counsellors are in a great place to listen, embrace and respond to their client / student's green conscience and conscientiousness while utilising all the best assets nature has to offer.

Nature and the Environment moving to centre stage:

The European Union's Green Deal is an action plan for Europe to become carbon neutral by 2050. It plans to boost the economy through green technology, create sustainable industry and transport whilst cutting down on

pollution¹. The EU plans to 'turn climate and environmental challenges into opportunities' and guidance counsellors are in prime position to help their clients seize these². As well as becoming carbon neutral by 2050, Ireland intends on cutting its emissions by 55% by 2030, so change is coming quickly. Minister for Climate Action and the Environment, Eamon Ryan says; "This is where the money is. This is where the new economy is going, where the jobs are going to come. It's radical change; change for the better"³.

Irish Higher Education Institutes responding to changing trends:

Irish Higher Education Institutions are rising to the challenge of this new reality by increasing the number of courses with the environment and sustainability at their core. According to the latest CAO trends, thousands of students are choosing these courses and pursuing careers

¹ European Union (2019) https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

² European Union (2019) https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

³ Eamon Ryan, The Irish Times 22nd September 2020. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/eamon-ryan-interview-climate-action-is-where-the-jobs-are-going-to-come-1.4364614>



in science and the environment this year⁴. Their figures support reports of a surge in interest among Leaving Cert students in careers linked to tackling climate change and promoting sustainability.

Business:

In Business too, nature and sustainability are moving to centre stage. Danielle Barron of the Irish Times describes how consumer demand has meant that many of the world's leading companies have set targets to become carbon neutral or even carbon negative by 2030⁵. Marie Gillespie of Davie's stockbrokers, while speaking about green finance, described how "There is a growing awareness that in businesspeople and the planet matter every bit as much as profit"⁶. Being green has gone from niche to mainstream. People are making green decisions and want their values to be reflected in where they work. There is no doubt that guidance counsellors will be meeting clients with green values.

Career theory and thinking green:

According to career theorist Geoffrey Peruniak 'there is little written about nature in career development literature' (Peruniak, 2010, p.149). However, career theorist Sunny Hansen, through her Integrative Life Planning Theory, encourages us to empower clients to make choices and decisions that will contribute positively for 'human beings and for the environment' (Hansen, 2001, p.266). She emphasises that career counsellors should act as advocates for change and encourage their clients to strive 'not only for self-satisfaction but for the common good' (Hansen, 2001, p.261).

Nature and our wellbeing:

Guidance provision in schools involves collective and collaborative action to develop student learning, behaviour and wellbeing, and the conditions that support these. Perhaps nature could be an ideal ally to consider collaborating with to achieve these aims?

How can nature help our wellbeing? Nature can provide an effective tool in managing stress and an awareness of this could be useful in guidance counsellor's professional practice. There is growing evidence that proximity to natural environments and greenspace lowers levels of stress (Thompson et al., 2012). These de-stressing health benefits of nature are effective even after relatively brief exposure (Thompson et al., 2012). Roger Ulrich, in his writings on the health benefits of gardens in hospitals, proposed that nature scenes can 'sustain interest and attention, and accordingly can serve as pleasant distractions that may diminish stressful thoughts' (Ulrich, 2002, p.3). According to Professors of Psychology Rachel and Stephen Kaplan (1989), natural environments induce 'soft fascination' which is a human response that captures attention while eliciting good feelings. This response to nature is involuntary and the 'soft fascination' means that while the person feels fascinated and captivated, he or she can still engage in reflection. Unlike urban stimuli, a sunrise, the sound of birds singing, or a beautiful view captivates humans in an effortless and replenishing way (Kaplan, 2001). By reducing the demand on executive thinking, the soft or effortless fascination of these natural environments allows greater restoration of depleted attentional resources (Kaplan, 1995, 2001).



⁴ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/increase-in-cao-applications-for-science-and-environment-courses-1.4197899>

⁵ <https://www.irishtimes.com/special-reports/managing-personal-wealth/greener-finance-the-tectonic-plates-are-shifting-in-investing-1.4354664>

⁶ <https://www.irishtimes.com/special-reports/managing-personal-wealth/greener-finance-the-tectonic-plates-are-shifting-in-investing-1.4354664>

The use of nature in other wellbeing contexts:

The HSE have experimented with the use of nature in recent times. In 2012, they successfully trialled the 'Green Prescription' in County Donegal⁷. A 'Green Prescription' is a General Practitioner's written advice for their patient to be physically active in a natural setting and involved a twelve-week community walking programme. According to the evaluation of the trial, there was unanimous agreement that the programme was beneficial and offered an alternative and complimentary means of treating many health conditions. It further found that there was a 'significant improvement in mental wellbeing over the course of the twelve-week Green Prescription Programme'⁸.

Psychotherapists are also finding creative ways of integrating nature into their practice which guidance counsellors could take inspiration from. Ecotherapy is a nature-based method of psychotherapy which embraces the healing and psychological benefits of nature in the therapy process (Jordan and Marshall, 2010). Green exercise, time in forests, viewing of landscapes and participation in horticulture therapy are examples of the broad range of nature-based activities which exist in ecotherapy (Jordan, 2009).

NUIG, the HSE and the Environmental Protection Agency have recently (Oct 2020) completed a report called NEAR 'Nature and the Environment to Attain and

Restore Health'⁹. The study provides us with evidence-based research on the benefits of being in nature. The report explores how being in nature makes us feel better, more connected to one another and helps us care for the environment. They have created a practical and innovative toolkit, based on their NEAR research, which aims to help people find ways to engage with nature to improve their health and wellbeing¹⁰. The toolkit includes evidence-based activities such as sea swimming, surf therapy, yoga hikes, beach cleaning, walking, bat monitoring and sailing. Such examples offer guidance counsellors a glimpse of the creative ways in which we could integrate the positive benefits of nature into our practice.

Conclusion:

One of the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals is to 'ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature'¹¹. Making our clients aware of green and sustainable careers and listening to their voice on sustainability may help us to achieve and contribute to some of the SDGs going forward¹². As Guidance counsellors we are well placed to embrace the challenges, opportunities and lessons which nature has to offer our profession and facilitate a meaningful conversation about nature and sustainability with our clients into the future.



About the Author:

John O'Donohoe is a Guidance Counsellor in St. Fintan's High School, Sutton. John has a keen interest in the areas of nature, the environment and sustainability. He has completed research on the inclusion of nature themes in guidance counselling practice as part of his Masters in Guidance Counselling in DCU.

⁷ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/corporate/evaluationgreenprescription.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/corporate/evaluationgreenprescription.pdf>

⁹ http://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/research/health/Research_Report_348.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/research/health/JS%20%20NEAR%20Toolkit%20FINAL%20V1.6%2010Oct20.pdf>

¹¹ https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

¹² <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>



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