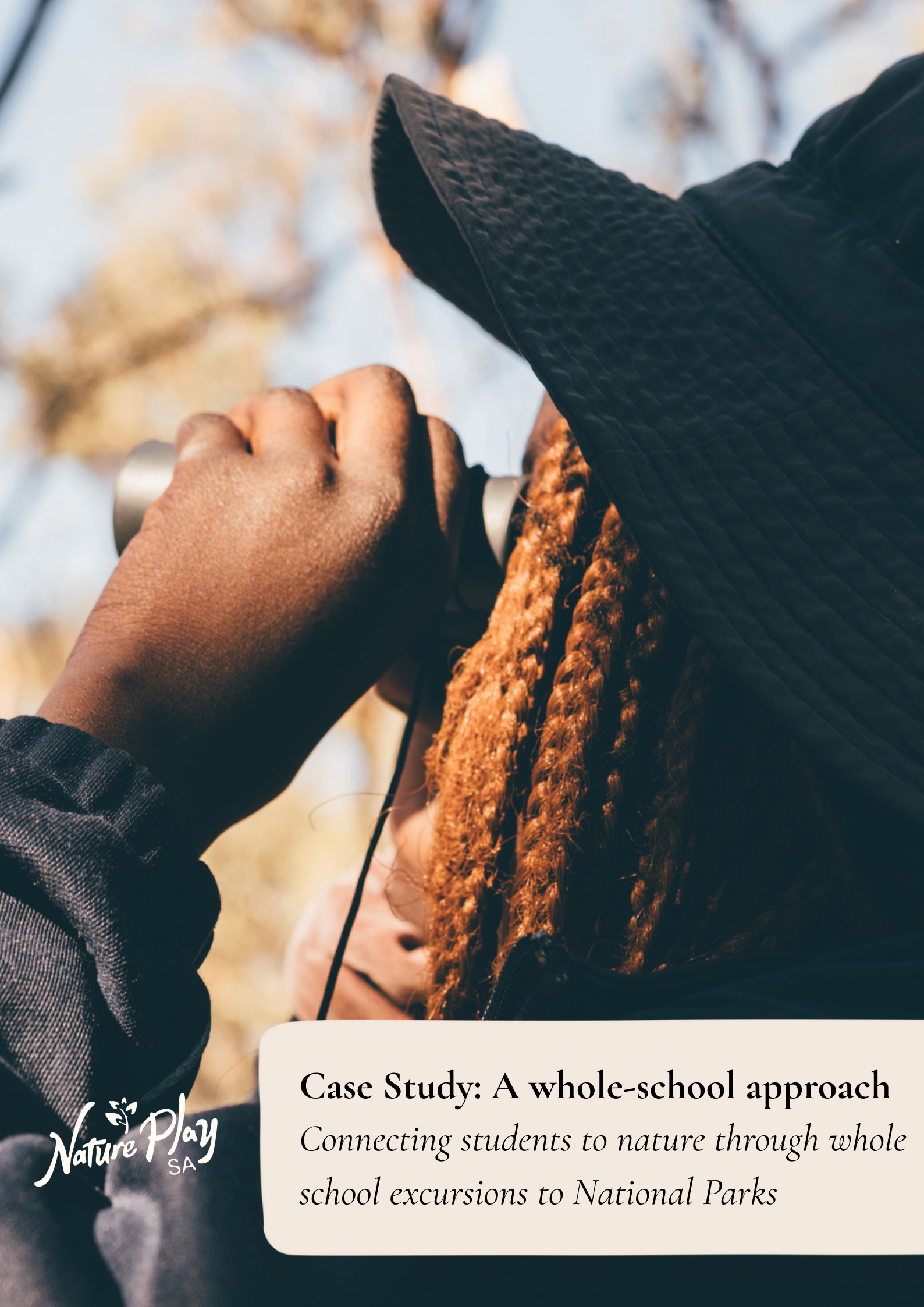




Case Study: A whole-school approach
*Connecting students to nature through whole
school excursions to National Parks*

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Executive Summary



In 2024–25, McAuley Community School in Brighton, in partnership with Nature Play SA and supported by Green Adelaide, demonstrated what's possible when a whole-school vision for outdoor learning is brought to life. Over 400 students from Reception to Year 6 participated in a series of large-scale, inclusive excursions across three National Parks, embedding nature connection, biodiversity, and student wellbeing into the heart of the school's culture and curriculum.

Driven by a shared commitment and meticulous planning, this initiative offered students regular opportunities to engage in hands-on, real-world learning, exploring local flora and fauna, solving challenges, collaborating with peers, and experiencing freedom and wonder in nature-rich settings. The partnership ensured every child, regardless of background or ability, could participate fully thanks to universal design, robust risk assessment processes, and tailored supports such as social scripts for neurodiverse students.

Qualitative feedback highlighted transformative outcomes: students expressed awe and curiosity at wildlife discoveries, developed confidence and collaborative skills, and found calm, joy, and belonging in natural spaces. Parents and educators alike observed improved wellbeing and engagement, noting the value of unstructured play and storytelling in deepening connection to place and self.

This case study demonstrates that embedding outdoor learning through a whole-school approach is not only achievable but vital for nurturing resilience, empathy, and stewardship in young people. By directly addressing the contemporary challenges of digital disconnection and declining nature access, McAuley Community School's model serves as an inspiring, case study for schools across South Australia.

With continued support from Green Adelaide, Nature Play SA look forward to building on these successes through developing resources, toolkits, and professional learning to enable more schools to take learning outside and cultivate a generation of environmentally connected and confident learner.

Project Snapshot

Project Name: A whole-school approach

Location: Belair National Park, Glenthorne National Park and Morialta Conservation Park

Target audience: Students from reception to year 6 (whole school)

Funding source: Green Adelaide

Date/Timeframe: 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025

Program Type: Outdoor Learning

Partners Involved: McAuley Community School

Contact for more info: Jason Tyndall





Impact Snapshot

July 2024 – June 2025

- 450 students (Reception to Year 6) per excursion engaged in immersive outdoor learning experiences
- 50 educators per excursion participated, collaborating to embed outdoor learning into curriculum delivery and whole-school culture.
- 50+ parents and carers joined each excursion, strengthening community connection and shared stewardship of nature.
- 3 National Parks explored – Belair, Glenthorne, and Morialta – showcasing diverse ecosystems and cultural stories.
- 9+ distinct activities offered, each intentionally aligned with student dispositions, wellbeing outcomes, and Australian Curriculum links.
- Experiences designed with full student agency, inclusive access, and mindful pacing to support students with additional needs.
- Cross-curricular themes of biodiversity, conservation, wellbeing, cultural connection, and creativity embedded throughout.

At a glance: A whole-school approach delivered as a strategic and inclusive learning model that built curiosity, confidence, and care for the environment across the entire school community.





I. Context

In today's digital age, young people face an ever-increasing challenge of disconnection from the natural world. With screen time on the rise, children and adolescents often lack the incentives and opportunities to spend meaningful time outdoors, weakening their relationship with nature and limiting the positive impacts it can have on their wellbeing and development.

Connection to nature is a foundational element that fosters not only environmental stewardship but also broader personal growth. Research consistently shows that outdoor learning contributes to improved student wellbeing by enhancing concentration, academic performance, confidence, and social relationships. Time spent in natural environments supports mental health, reduces stress, and promotes a sense of belonging. It also deepens students' connection to the natural world, an essential precursor to caring for and protecting the environment.

Nature learning complements and enriches the formal curriculum by providing hands-on, experiential opportunities to explore science, creativity, and cultural knowledge in real-world contexts. However, for these benefits to be fully realised, it is vital that schools adopt a whole-school approach, embedding outdoor learning into their culture, values, and practices.

McAuley Community School in Brighton stands as an outstanding example of such a commitment. With the support and partnership of Nature Play SA and allied organisations, McAuley has embraced large-scale whole school excursions and integrated nature experiences as core to their educational approach. This leadership not only benefits the students directly but also serves as a powerful model that informs and inspires the wider education sector on the transformative power of outdoor learning.





2. Objective

The key objective of the whole-school approach is to:

Embed outdoor learning as a core part of McAuley Community School's culture and curriculum, fostering deeper connections to nature, enhancing student wellbeing, and enriching educational outcomes through whole-school engagement.

Strategies to achieve objective:

To achieve the objective the below strategies were developed:

1. **Whole-school commitment:** Engage staff, students, families, and the wider community to build shared understanding and enthusiasm for outdoor learning, ensuring consistent support and participation across the school.
2. **Integrate outdoor learning across curriculum:** Embed nature-based activities and outdoor experiences into diverse subject areas to complement and enhance learning goals, making nature connection a natural part of everyday education.
3. **Provide regular, hands-on nature experiences:** Organise frequent whole-class and whole-school excursions, outdoor lessons, and play opportunities that allow students to explore, observe, and interact with natural environments.
4. **Enhance accessibility and inclusivity:** Design outdoor learning activities and environments that are welcoming and accessible to all students, accommodating diverse needs to ensure everyone can participate meaningfully.
5. **Build educator capacity:** Offer professional development and resources to teachers and staff to confidently plan, facilitate, and integrate outdoor learning across school programs.
6. **Monitor and celebrate impact:** Collect qualitative and quantitative feedback on student wellbeing, engagement, and learning outcomes related to outdoor education, sharing successes and refining approaches collaboratively.





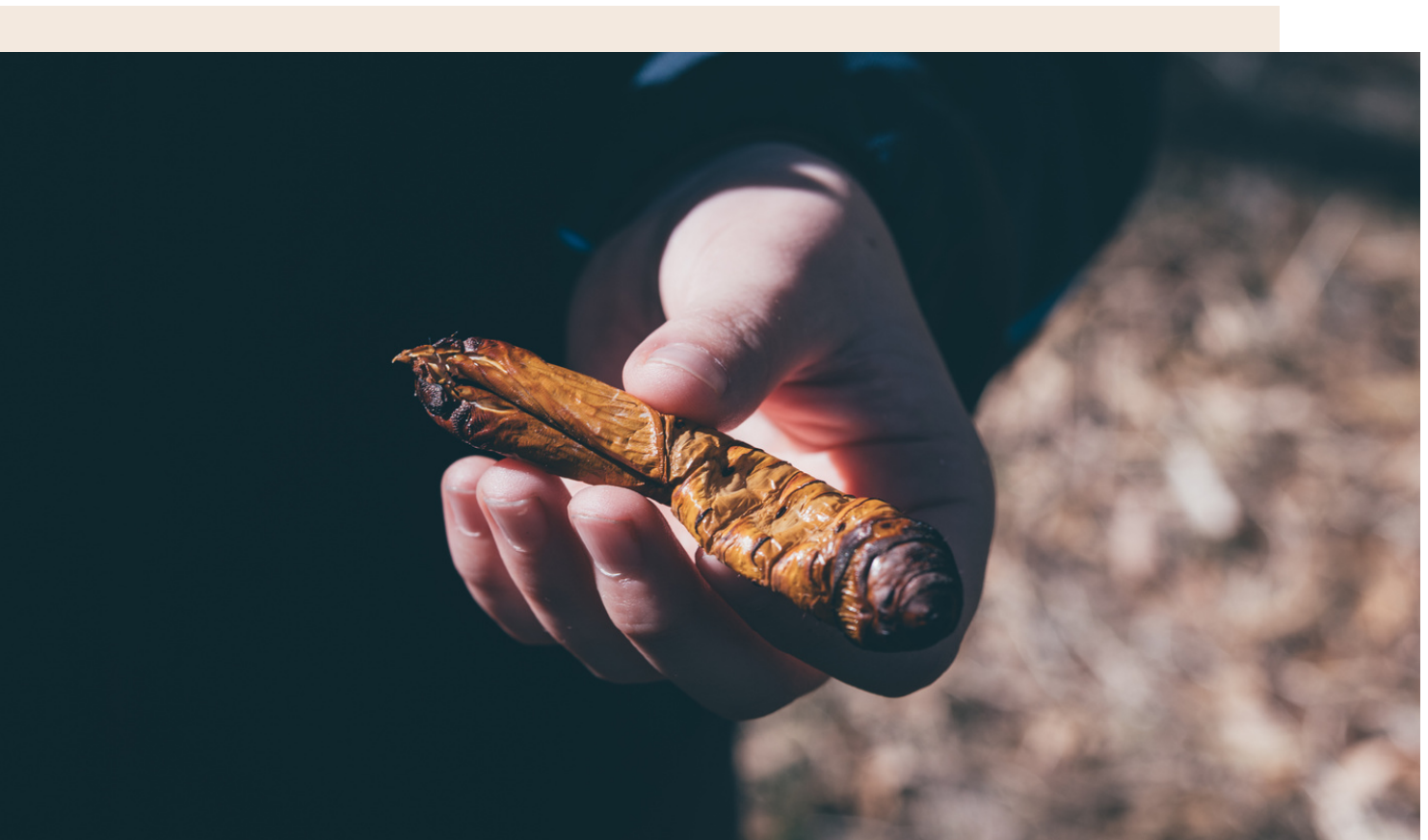
3. Our Approach

Our education programs are intentionally designed to be accessible and inclusive, ensuring every student can participate meaningfully, regardless of background or ability. We achieve this through a robust risk assessment process that places student voices at the centre, actively involving them in risk discussions and decision-making. This collaboration not only enhances safety but also empowers students to take ownership of their learning experience.

While we provide a clear program structure, our delivery is shaped by student agency. Sessions are interactive, flexible, and responsive to student curiosity, with key themes such as biodiversity, wellbeing, and conservation underpinning every experience. This approach is designed to cultivate stewardship— helping students build the motivation and capacity to care for and protect the natural world.

We work closely with educators to align experiences with curriculum priorities, ensuring outdoor learning strengthens classroom outcomes while engaging students in hands-on, real-world discovery. Educational props such as biodiversity signage boards and our extensive collection of native specimens bring environments to life, creating opportunities for deeper understanding and sensory connection. Storytelling is woven throughout our sessions to ground students in the unique history, ecology, and significance of each place, and all programs are enriched by Aboriginal cultural knowledge provided by our Aboriginal Cultural Advisor, Kauwanu Tamaru.

Our work with **McAuley Community School** was an opportunity for us to bring all these elements to life at scale, working with over 400 students. Together with the school, who led the way in meeting the logistical challenge, we delivered a series of immersive experiences across three different National Parks. This collaborative effort showcased how, with shared vision and planning, whole-school outdoor learning can be both transformative for students and feasible for educators.



3.1 Implementation

The following table presents a summary of the activities offered by our team during the whole-school excursions, intentionally aligned to key student dispositions, wellbeing benefits, and relevant Australian Curriculum outcomes to ensure inclusive, mindful, and deeply impactful learning for all participants.

Activities	Dispositions	Wellbeing Impact	Australian Curriculum Alignment
Wildlife watercolour sessions at Belair National Park	Mindfulness, Creativity, Patience	Supports calmness and emotional regulation through slow, focused artistic engagement.	Arts: Explore materials, techniques and technologies to express ideas (Visual Arts). Science: Observe and describe local wildlife and habitats.
Bandicoot storytelling and stick homes at Belair National Park	Curiosity, Empathy, Connection to place	Fosters social connection, cultural awareness, and a sense of belonging through storytelling and hands-on construction.	English: Engage with stories and cultural knowledge. Geography: Explore local environments and cultural connections.
Nature-inspired mandalas at Belair National Park	Mindfulness, Creativity, Observation	Encourages reflection, sensory engagement, and calmness through repetitive natural patterns.	Visual Arts: Respond to natural forms and use patterning in art. Science: Explore biological cycles and natural patterns.
Storytelling of local birds and characteristics at Glenthorne National Park	Empathy, Curiosity, Connection to place	Supports emotional understanding and cultural connection through narrative.	English: Listening and responding to texts. Science: Investigate features and behaviours of living things.
Bird watching and bird bingo teamwork at Glenthorne National Park	Teamwork, Observation, Curiosity	Promotes social connection, focus, and cooperative learning in a natural context.	Science: Observe and record living things. Health and PE: Collaboration and social skills development.
Clay sculpting of wildlife at Morialta Conservation Park	Creativity, Focus, Patience	Fosters mindfulness and self-expression through tactile art-making.	Visual Arts: Use sensory experiences and techniques to create artworks. Science: Connect with animal form and function.
Watercolour painting of flora and fauna at Morialta Conservation Park	Creativity, Mindfulness, Observation	Encourages patience, attention to detail, and emotional calm through artistic exploration.	Visual Arts: Develop skills in painting and colour blending. Science: Study plant and animal characteristics.
Loose parts play encouraging imagination at Morialta Conservation Park	Creativity, Autonomy, Problem-solving	Supports self-directed learning, imaginative exploration, and resilience.	Design and Technologies: Explore materials and design processes. Health and PE: Develop problem-solving and social skills.

Each activity provided full student agency, with no rigid structure and space for choice ensuring that all learners, found a sense of calm, inclusion, and empowerment in nature. These engagements were intentional, deeply aligned with both the dispositions and curriculum outcomes that underpin successful, meaningful outdoor learning.



4.1 Evaluation

Students

An enormous amount of data was received from over 400 students. However to dive deep into the impact we have assessed some qualitative responses from students.

What did you enjoy most?	Disposition assessment	Other observations
"I enjoyed walking in nature because it was quiet and peaceful and no one was there"	Mindfulness, Sensory Awareness, Solitude	Quiet immersion in nature supports emotional regulation, reduces stress, and fosters a deep sense of peace, crucial for student wellbeing. Such experiences are shown to enhance self-awareness and provide restorative benefits that complement classroom learning.
"Finding a gecko for the first time"	Curiosity, Awe, wonder, Scientific Thinking, Discovery	Encountering and naming local wildlife cultivates a sense of wonder, excitement, and scientific inquiry. This moment links observation, taxonomy, and ecological understanding - essential elements in developing environmental literacy and stewardship. The emotional impact of "first discoveries" encourages respect and fascination for biodiversity.
"Everyone from other classes could play with us, we could play with nature because we don't have much nature at school"	Social Connection, Belonging, Equity	Highlights the importance of accessible green space for inclusivity and social integration. Shared play in natural areas promotes a sense of belonging and strengthens relationships, addressing gaps in everyday access to nature for children.
"I enjoyed doing geocaching the most because you got to explore all around the park and you got to try and find all of the things on the list"	Exploration, Problem-Solving, Curiosity, Resilience	Geocaching builds teamwork, navigation skills and perseverance as students solve clues and seek treasures. It blends outdoor adventure with critical thinking, encouraging learning through play and real-world applications.
"Looking for bugs because I saw a scorpion"	Bravery, Curiosity, Exploration, Attention to Detail	Close observation of insects and invertebrates develops careful attention, scientific observation skills and bravery. Hands-on encounters with wildlife foster an appreciation for diversity and ecological roles.
"Freedom"	Autonomy, Independence, Self-direction	Having unstructured time outdoors gives students agency and supports intrinsic motivation, allowing them to choose activities and direct their own learning; this is cited in research as a key driver of wellbeing and confidence.
"What I liked most was walking in the dried up creeks and seeing all the animals like koalas and kangaroos"	Observation, Wonder, Connection to Place, Empathy	Direct interaction with local fauna engenders empathy and respect, reinforcing sense of place. Seeing iconic animals in their environment encourages storytelling, memory-making, and a personal stake in conservation.



4.1 Evaluation Cont.

What did you enjoy most?	Disposition assessment	Other observations
“Exploring around the woods and finding a mysterious cocoon from a rain moth”	Curiosity, Scientific Inquiry, Imagination	Discovering and investigating mysteries in nature stimulates creative thinking, scientific hypothesis (“What is this cocoon?”), and eagerness to learn more about lifecycles and adaptations, core science curriculum outcomes.
“Exploring the national park with my friend and we saw a frog”	Friendship, Shared Discovery, Joy, Connection	Shared outdoor experiences deepen social bonds, build collaborative skills, and encourage collective exploration. Joint discovery heightens enthusiasm and the sense of wonder.
“Playing with my friends and looking for koalas”	Teamwork, Friendship, Observation, Excitement	Collaborative searching promotes teamwork and a sense of achievement. Excitement in shared wildlife encounters encourages engagement, communication, and joyful learning.
“I enjoyed seeing the Kangaroos and building cubbies”	Creativity, Collaboration, Stewardship, Connection	Hands-on building activities develop creativity and problem-solving, linking imaginative play with ecological awareness. Observing animals in situ while constructing habitats creates a sense of care and environmental responsibility.
“The art and building a bandicoot home”	Creativity, Empathy, Advocacy, Stewardship	Combining artistic expression with practical conservation helps children develop empathy toward native species and an understanding of habitat needs. Creating shelters and art fosters advocacy for wildlife while deepening curriculum connections between art and science.



4.II Student Voices



“Exploring around the woods and finding a mysterious cocoon from a rain moth”. - *Student*



“Everyone from other classes could play with us, we could play with nature because we don’t have much nature at school” - *Student*



“I enjoyed walking in nature because it was quiet and peaceful and no one was there” - *Student*



Parent Voices

“I just love how the day wasn’t structured so the learners could choose how they wanted to spend their time.”

Parent

“It was so lovely to watch the children immersed in nature play with the freedom to do as they pleased. Seeing all the wildlife and kangaroo skull was definitely a highlight for many.”

Parent

“I loved the excursion today - the kids soaked up the freedom and nature and I could see their bodies relax”.

Parent



Student Voices

For some students they demonstrated their experience and connection through drawings:







5. Challenges, Reflections & Learnings

Key challenges	Action taken	Outcome
Risk management for such a large cohort of students	Comprehensive risk assessment completed by both Nature Play SA and McAuley Community School	Risk management processes employed with no serious issues occurring
Ensuring all experiences were age-appropriate	Applied universal design principles	Parents, educators and students were all able to participate in all activities
Ensuring accessibility to all needs	Experiences were designed to be accessible which not only included the physical environment but also through social scripts for neurodiverse students who needed confidence and clarity about what day would look like	All experiences were accessible. Where available social scripts were provided and used
Balancing freedom with curriculum alignment	Ensuring that unstructured exploration and student-led choices were meaningfully connected to learning outcomes across different year levels	Educators felt all experiences were rich in curriculum links
Managing varied engagement levels	Some students with limited prior outdoor experience required additional scaffolding to fully engage, highlighting the importance of pre-excursion preparation in the classroom	High engagement rates were experienced across all three sites
Learnings		
- Students have different expectations based on the time they spend outside, this should be considered when gathering data - Freedom to explore is important to incorporate into school excursions - Storytelling is our most powerful tool to support students connect with nature and should be given priority in planning and preparation - Large-scale excursions offer unique peer-mixing opportunities: students valued connecting with peers from other classes and year levels, which contributed to a stronger sense of belonging across the school.		
Recommendations		
- Pre-excursion classroom activities that introduce the location, species, and cultural stories can heighten anticipation and enhance learning in the field. - Further resources be developed to support schools visiting natural spaces without additional facilitation needed - Schools be provided with social scripts for potential excursion sites to improve inclusion and accessibility - Offer professional learning for educators on integrating unstructured play and student agency within curriculum frameworks. - A guide for utilising National Parks for primary schools be considered - Consider developing a “Whole-School Outdoor Excursion” toolkit with logistical planning templates, accessibility checklists, and curriculum link examples to support schools in scaling up similar programs.		



6. Next steps

Several next steps are either underway or in a planning phase:

- Resources are currently being co-designed with schools to support them connect deeper with nature.
- Discussions on how to support large school excursions without facilitation are underway with several schools.
- Renewed storytelling tools are being developed that support wellbeing and nature connection.
- Development of pre and post excursion classroom packs to help teachers prepare students and extend learning after visits to National Parks.
- Creation of a “Whole-School Outdoor Excursion Toolkit” including logistical planning templates, curriculum links, and accessibility checklists to help schools replicate this model independently.

7. Conclusion

The partnership between Nature Play SA and McAuley Community School demonstrates what is possible when an entire school commits to embedding outdoor learning into its culture. Over 400 students engaged in meaningful, hands-on experiences across three National Parks, each opportunity rich with biodiversity encounters, unstructured play, and moments of connection. These were not just excursions, they were transformative journeys that nurtured student wellbeing, strengthened social bonds, and deepened connection to place.

The qualitative feedback speaks volumes. Students spoke of wonder on finding a gecko and scorpions, joy in spending time with friends, pride in building homes for native species, and the calm of walking through quiet bushland. Parents observed their children calm in nature, soaking up unstructured time and the freedom to explore. Teachers witnessed students building confidence, showing care for the environment, and displaying curiosity and imagination.

This whole-school approach not only met curriculum goals but also cultivated the dispositions of empathy, resilience, curiosity, and stewardship, that underpin lifelong environmental care. It showed outdoor learning at scale is both achievable and deeply impactful when supported by strong planning, accessible design, and shared commitment.

As pressures on student wellbeing rise and nature connection declines, programs like this are no longer ‘nice to have’ - they are essential. The success at McAuley provides a replicable model for other schools seeking to integrate outdoor learning meaningfully, inclusively, and sustainably.

We thank Green Adelaide for funding and supporting this work, and we look forward to building on these achievements to help more schools take learning outside, creating a generation who not only understand the natural world, but feel part of it.



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