



CASE STUDY

Sandford Award Criteria 2

The education programmes at the site contribute to an understanding of the local and national heritage

Explore how engaging presentations and fieldwork activities at Fota Wildlife Park help students appreciate the biodiversity of Ireland's flora and fauna.

Fota Wildlife Park, Ireland



Fota Wildlife Park was founded in 1983 by the Zoological Society of Ireland and its vision is 'to inspire people to understand and conserve the biodiversity of our natural world'. The park holds conservation, education and research as its main objectives. Covering 100 acres of the Fota Estate on the fringes of Cork Harbour, a designated Special Area of Conservation, it provides a home to over 114 species, many categorised as critically endangered under International Union for Conservation of Nature guidelines. Fota Wildlife Park is actively involved in the conservation of both indigenous and exotic floral and faunal species through in and ex situ programmes.

Session Description: Practical Field Ecology - Key Stage: Irish Leaving Certificate (age 16 – 18 years)

A morning lecture was followed by afternoon practical field studies in woodland and meadows.

Curriculum links: Biology syllabus: 1.4 General Principles of Ecology and 1.5 A Study of an Ecosystem. The Leaving Certificate is the final exam of the Irish secondary school system and enables a student to matriculate to University.

What impressed the Sandford Award Judge?

‘Questions were posed and answers sought from the students quite seamlessly throughout the lecture’

‘The morning lecture was delivered in a clear and concise manner and used a PowerPoint presentation at its core. New and newly familiar words (‘biodiversity’, ‘abiotic’, ‘biomes’, etc.) were explained as they were introduced and added to a flip chart to one side of the main AV screen. Some of the more complicated words were broken down to their Latin origins. Questions were posed and answers sought from the students quite seamlessly throughout the lecture. It was mentioned several times that certain subjects might come up on future examination papers and that the pupils might want to “write this bit down”.’

‘There were a lot of facts and figures but plenty of time is given to absorb them and to make notes as necessary. At one point a couple of taxidermy models and skulls are held aloft to further illustrate a point and to help pose some new questions. References to relevant nature programmes on Sky and YouTube are made and discussed with those that had already seen them.’

The fieldwork staff’s ‘enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, their subject is infectious’

‘In the afternoon, the group is split into two smaller groups for a rotation of three practical sampling activities in nearby natural woodlands and meadows. Delivery is by a combination of contract staff - zoology graduates of University College Cork and a former science teacher. Their enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, their subject is infectious. They fully engage the students in a variety of quantitative and qualitative flora and fauna sampling activities. They do this well by using headset microphones with the students stood in a large circle around them to explain the tasks, to introduce and demonstrate any equipment that is to be used, by going through printed out spotter guides in detail, and by then supporting the students whilst they undertake the set tasks.’

‘There are three activities: a qualitative woodland survey, a random quantitative grassland survey and a non-random quantitative grassland survey. The third took place

in a marquee using a set of laminated images to simulate the activity as recent rainy weather had flooded the particular grassland to be surveyed. This back-up option, proved to be a suitable and effective substitute activity.'

Learning objectives (curriculum links) - What do teachers say?

The teacher particularly enjoys the combination of large group lectures and smaller group practical activities. She knows the sessions well and can see how they support and enhance the curriculum of her students so now works them into her medium-term planning. She is particularly impressed with the quality of delivery by the staff at Fota Wildlife Park and rated them very highly.

How did the sessions contribute to an understanding of the local and national heritage?

The sessions promoted Irish natural heritage and focussed on studying the local environment and looking at the biodiversity within. The random quantitative surveys in the grasslands, for example, had the students counting dandelions and clover. Discussion was directed towards species that are indigenous to Ireland. Mention was also made in the lecture about some conservation programmes that are in place, and some that are being developed, to support any endangered Irish species as well as some of the species that are sadly now extinct. The impact of humans, both globally and locally, was also discussed.

An excellent education programme that is 'stimulating, informative, and fun'

'Fota Wildlife Park offers an excellent education programme that matches the current Irish curriculum perfectly. It has held the Sandford Award consecutively since 2008 which is testament to the high quality of sessions on offer. There is a strong commitment to natural heritage and conservation issues with a special focus on the biodiversity of Ireland's flora and fauna. The education team are a highly skilled and friendly group of people and they make every moment stimulating, informative, and fun.'