

# NATURE CALLS

As the newly appointed Assistant Head (Nature), **Katy Kelly** stresses the vital part this new role plays in education

**W**e're proud to be pioneering a transformative approach to education, that places nature at the heart of learning and wellbeing. As Assistant Head (Nature), I'm delighted to share how this unique role is shaping the future of our school, enriching the lives of our pupils.

Mount Kelly is a co-ed day and boarding school for ages four to 18, nestled on the edge of Dartmoor. With 600 pupils and an "excellent" rating from the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), we're committed to delivering a holistic education, nurturing academic success, personal growth and emotional wellbeing.

Our journey into nature-based education began with a question: does time spent outdoors detract from academic achievement? An analysis of exam results revealed the opposite – pupils engaging in outdoor

faculty, embedding nature into every subject and year group. Pupils are involved in a Royal Society biodiversity project in partnership with the University of Plymouth, gaining exposure to professionals and research.

Nature is central to our wellbeing strategy. Green spaces are used for pupil regulation, replacing enclosed rooms with calming, outdoor environments. A woodland "biome" offers dedicated space for reflection and self-regulation, accessible to both pupils and staff. Staff wellbeing is prioritised, with encouragement to take wellbeing walks and engage with nature during breaks.

Using the Nature Connection Index (NCI) developed by Derby University tracking changes in wellbeing, engagement, and skills development, we commit to measuring impact. Early findings are promising: pupils report feeling calmer, more focused. Teachers observe increased participation and creativity in lessons. Cross-



Katy Kelly is Assistant Head, Nature at Mount Kelly School, Devon

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activities consistently achieved higher value-added grades than their peers. This compelling evidence led to a whole-school commitment to integrating nature into our strategic vision.

The role, Assistant Head (Nature), marks a significant milestone; we believe, the first full-time school leadership position dedicated solely to nature in education. My focus is to build connectedness: to nature, place, each other, and ourselves. This connectedness is not only vital for wellbeing, but enhances academic engagement and personal development.

Mount Kelly's grounds are a treasure trove of green and blue spaces, rich in biodiversity and natural beauty. While pupils have always had access to these areas, we now use them intentionally and creatively across the curriculum. Lessons are increasingly outdoors, especially tutor time, where pupils take nature walks, engage in reflective activities, and participate in hands-on experiences such as gardening and photography competitions. Activities encourage pupils to engage meaningfully with the world around them, encouraging conscious, mindful awareness of their environment, away from distractions of technology and screens.

Our Nature Connection programme empowers pupils to manage plots of land, grow plants, and explore the natural world. Resources and ideas are shared across

curricular links are emerging, with pupils making connections between nature and academic concepts.

Staff development is key to our strategy; regular INSET sessions, practical activity cards, a "staff nature" chat platform to share ideas. Our aim is to make nature integration accessible and sustainable, for all.

We're expanding our educational provision with new GCSE and A-level courses, launching a project to support nature connection in local primary schools, in collaboration with Oxford University – exploring impact on behaviour and attendance. In March, we will host the UK's first nature education conference, connecting educators, researchers, and policymakers to explore how nature can transform teaching and learning. We are introducing a nature scholarship to nurture and empower changemakers of the future, young people who demonstrate a passion for environmental stewardship, wellbeing, and innovative thinking, welcoming applications for a 2026 start.

As Assistant Head (Nature), I'm excited to lead this innovative journey. At Mount Kelly, we believe that nature isn't a distraction from learning – it's a powerful catalyst for it. By embedding nature into every aspect of school life, we're nurturing resilient, curious and compassionate young people who are deeply connected to the world around them. 🌿