

the magic of storytelling

Telling stories outdoors is one of the most important aspects of outdoor learning, argues Carol Murdoch

Author profile

Carol Murdoch is the founder of Love Outdoor Learning, supporting schools and settings across the UK to embed meaningful outdoor learning for all ages. Her practical approach blends curriculum outcomes with connection to place, play and well-being, making learning outdoors both purposeful and powerful.

A quiet kind of magic takes hold when stories are told under the open skies. Whether in the woods, where the rustle of leaves becomes an eager hush, or by the coast when the rolling waves bring a rhythm to the story, the air seems to hold its breath while we all lean in towards the storyteller and the land itself. The alchemy of story and place was the focus of my Telling Tales in Nature workshop at the Institute for Outdoor Learning's North-West Conference. We explored how storytelling can deepen our connection to nature while fostering environmental responsibility. One of my earliest encounters with this magic was as a ten-year-old at Dounan's Camp, my primary seven residential. We walked up the Doon Hill of Aberfoyle, famous for its fairies. That story, and the feel of it, is still with me more than thirty years on. Now, as an outdoor practitioner, I am honoured to introduce young and old to the magic of outdoor storytelling, sharing stories that root us in the present while guiding us towards more sustainable futures.

Rooted in story, grounded in place

For me, storytelling can begin with our welcome to the land, grounding us in our landscape and reminding us of the reciprocal relationship we can have with it. My welcome is a thanksgiving address inspired by the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address (also known as the Words That Come Before All Else). This beautiful and ancient prayer of thanks acknowledges all elements of the natural world, from the waters, animals and plants, to the winds, sun and stars. This is often recited at gatherings and ceremonies. My version begins...

“ To the circle of life, we give thanks to the great web that connects us all, seen and unseen, from the wee creatures to the tallest mountains. May we honour the balance that sustains us all. ”

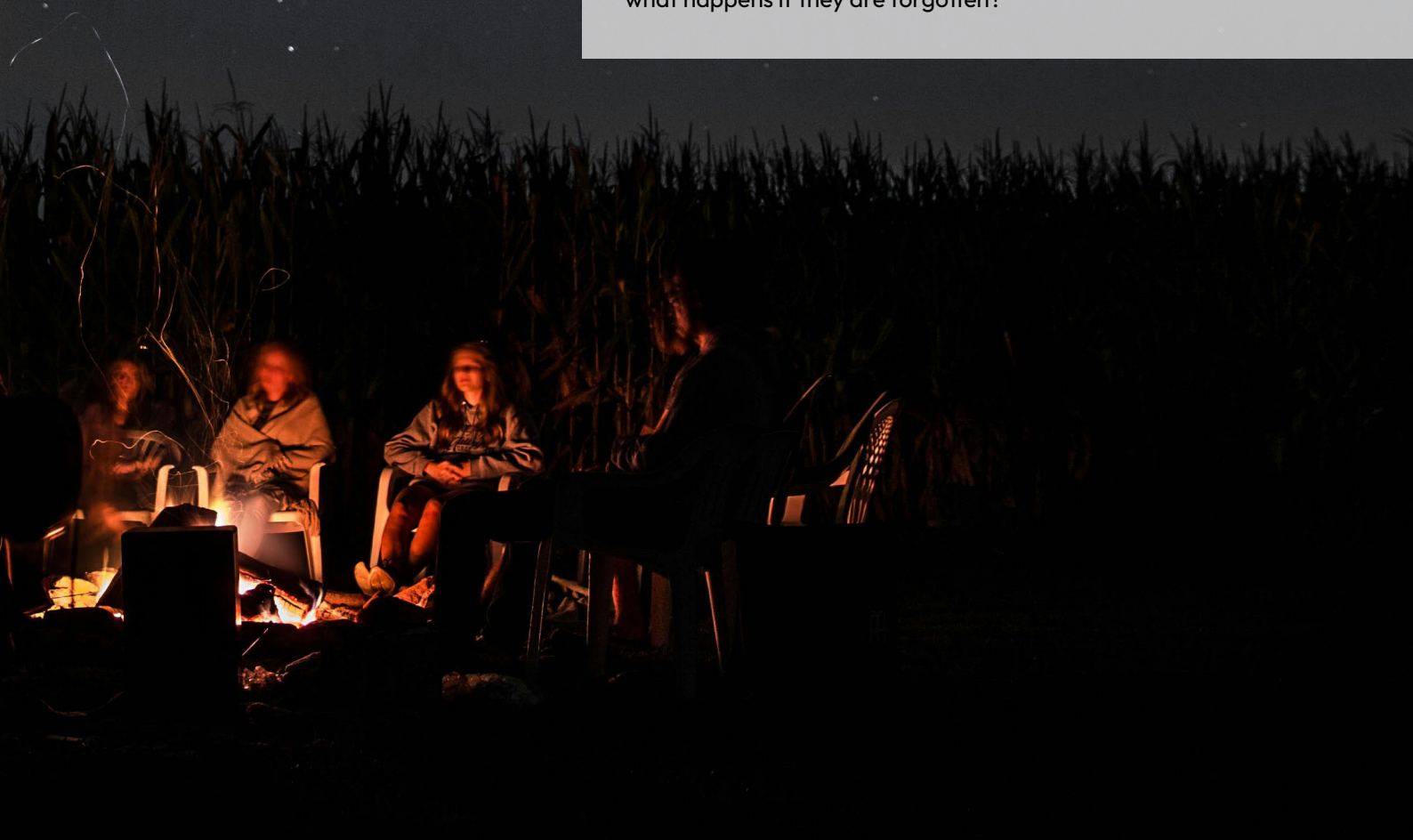
Why storytelling belongs outdoors

Stories are how we make meaning. In times gone by, before Kindles and Smartboards, knowledge was carried in tales and woven into memories. They help us learn about the land, values and our place within it. When we tell stories outdoors, especially those rooted in the local environment, we teach and transform. Storytelling supports emotional well-being by offering gentle ways to explore big feelings – a tree weathering the storm becomes a mirror for a child feeling the pressures of living. Sustainability comes to life, helping learners make complex connections. Stories like how the Rowan bent its branches to shelter a weary traveller from storm and hunger, its berries offering food and its leaves creating warmth, show how small actions matter. Most powerfully, storytelling cultivates a deep sense of place. Learning our oral history in the place it originates fosters affection for the local environment, laying the foundations for lifelong stewardship.

Seasonal storywork: August and the turning year

The stories I use change depending on the time of year. August is a moment of transition; it might still be summer, but we are edging towards harvest and autumn. This liminality is rich soil for the story. August is traditionally when Lùnastal (Scottish Gaelic) or Lammas (Old English hlāfmæsse, meaning “loaf mass”) marked the beginning of the harvest season. We might explore Burns Ballad of John Barleycorn with an older group. Or, with a younger group, we could learn about Blaeberry Sunday - telling them that the berries ripened high each year on the hill, but only those who gave thanks could find the sweetest ones. One year, a child forgot to say thank you to the land and the birds and the berries vanished! The child had to learn to listen, ask kindly and make things right.

I could then invite my group to reflect on this through co-creating stories in small groups. We might wonder aloud: What if the last grain of wheat held a secret? What happens when a hedgehog forgets to prepare for autumn? Who watches over the ripening brambles – and what happens if they are forgotten?



From scavenger to story: a practical framework

Another easily adaptable yet seasonal activity to help inspire stories is a simple sensory scavenger hunt followed by group storytelling. Here's how to adapt it:

Gather the group together to explore the area slowly. Challenge them to find one thing that ignites their senses (sound, smell, sight, touch). I aim to leave this very open, but if the group needs support I might use a leaf that looks like a dragon wing or how the wind moves through a particular tree. From there, we pair and share. The group introduces their chosen inspiration to their partner before joining a group of four. Again, each person shares their inspiration before the group works together to co-create a story featuring everyone's sensory discovery.

I love the magic that comes from this activity, regardless of whether someone is three years old and just learning about the world or in their sixties, having spent a lifetime outdoors. Everyone's contribution is meaningful and helps to create the magic.

Once all groups have their story, we create a story circle, sharing the stories - the group leaning in, eager to hear what comes next. This activity is open-ended, emotionally resonant, completely free and, best of all, simple. All you need is an outdoor space and the trust to let imagination lead. It also connects the group to the outdoor area, developing a sense of place.

Bringing in global and cultural wisdom

While I am in Scotland, a land rich in tales and steeped in lore, I also love how storytelling can connect cultures, exploring ecological wisdom from around the world. These tales connect the world in a real and meaningful way, especially with older learners. Tales such as *Why the Sun and Moon Live in the Sky* from Nigeria teach us about hospitality, imbalance and consequence. Over in Australia, we have the story of the Rainbow Serpent, which speaks of creation and the need to respect the land or face the results of greed. From the Ojibwe people comes *How the Bear Lost its Tail*, a clever tale about pride, trickery and adaptation, and in Hawai'i the story of Pele, Goddess of Volcanoes, reminds us of nature's power to destroy and create. These stories are far more than curiosities. They carry meaningful lessons about relationships, responsibility and respect, showing that these values transcend borders.

Carrying the stories forward

Outdoor storytelling is not merely a lesson. It's a practice, a way of being, a small magic. Each story told outside becomes part of the place in which it was shared.

As we ended our workshop, I shared this blessing with the group and it feels like the right place to end here, too:

“

May there be beauty to the left of you
 May there be beauty to the right of you
 May there be beauty above you
 May there be beauty below you
 And may you remember and share the beauty within you

”

