

Lost and found

Since its publication last year, *The Lost Words*, a new book by Robert Macfarlane and artist Jackie Morris, has not only become a publishing phenomenon, but also captured the public's imagination in a way rarely seen before. **Rob Bushby** catches up with Robert Macfarlane, and (overleaf) outlines some of the Trust's links with the initiative

There are many nature writers around today, but one thing that sets you apart is your exploration of the symbolism and language of nature. Where does this passion come from?

I guess I'd first of all push back a little against the term 'nature writer,' which has become unhelpfully branded these past 10 years or so as the market and the genre have boomed in Britain. The best of this writing is probably better described as, well, just 'writing'. It engages with the complex questions of our relationships with the more-than-human world of weather, climate, land and creaturely life. Love, fear, hope, loss, belonging, de-racination, identification, alienation, care, naming, state power, childhood, conservatism, radicalism, the Anthropocene ... The subjects of the best of what we can rather blandly call 'nature writing' are hugely various, often political, and very contemporary - though the roots of this new literature reach all the way back to Celtic Christian 'green' poetry of the 6th-9th centuries.

But to answer the question about passion, well, books and mountains, simply put. A childhood spent in mountains around Britain, above all the Cairngorms, about which range I've gone on to write extensively. And finding my way into the literature of mountaineering, polar exploration, wilderness and nature, from George Mallory on Everest through to Dorothy Wordsworth, Nan Shepherd and JA Baker, as well as - in terms of poetry - the three Hs (Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes and Gerard Manley Hopkins). My life has involved the criss-crossing of language and landscape ever since: currently as a writer, walker and teacher in Cambridge (a landscape where we're not, I must say, over-endowed with mountains).

This new book builds on a theme you've been developing for some time. Does the diminishing vocabulary of nature reflect a disconnect from the natural world, or just a standardisation of language?

In the case of the 'lost words,' it's unmistakably symptomatic of a dwindling

engagement with nature, up and down the ages. A 2017 RSPB Birdwatch survey, assessing nature knowledge in parents rather than children, found that of 2,000 adults, half couldn't identify a house sparrow, a quarter didn't know a blue tit or a starling, and a fifth thought a red kite wasn't a bird - but nine out of 10 said they wanted children to learn about common British wildlife.

The hunger is there, but the knowledge is not. This isn't the 'fault' of children, of course; it's a function of massive changes to the ways we have organised society and place in this country and beyond. But if we are unable to see, know or name even in a basic way the creatures and plants with which we share our everyday lives and landscapes, why (and how) on earth would we work for their good, even when their good is also our good?

People talk about a disconnect between young people and nature, yet in schools there seems to be more involvement with the outdoors than ever before, while nature programmes have become as popular as soaps on TV. Isn't the future looking a little more optimistic?

You're right to sound hopeful. And I am hopeful, too. The work of organisations like the John Muir Trust, or Action For Conservation (a charity of which I'm a founding trustee), or countless other charities or grassroots work, the rise of Forest Schools, the presence of inspiring young people like @naturalistdara, the incredible success and reach of the John Muir Award - these are all grounds for great optimism. As, in fact, is the overwhelming response to *The Lost Words*: an expression, to me, of the mixture of passion, hope and anxiety that characterises our relations with the natural world at present.

I've been especially heartened by what has happened to *The Lost Words*, and by the extraordinary legislative and institutional changes around plastic that have been triggered by Attenborough's *Blue Planet II*. From the Queen to Ryanair to the European Commission to Iceland supermarkets to Michael Gove; all manner of unlikely



PHOTOGRAPH: JACKIE MORRIS

people and organisations have declared their intent to change. We're at a tipping point with plastics, and I think this is a crisis we can beat - and that culture and art have vital roles to play in that battle.

In the past you've made the interesting point that, for many, the word 'blackberry' conjures up the image of a gadget rather than a forest fruit. Technology has certainly become a more central part of our lives, but can it not also give as well as take ... particularly in terms of social media helping spread the language and imagery of nature?

Ha! Yes, I'm always keen to decouple the old oppositions when I meet them, especially the oppositions of tech vs nature, and country vs city. We need to understand 'nature' as a complex category, constantly shifting in its aspects and its geographies, messy in the politics and behaviour it produces.

I'm thrilled by the recent declaration of London as a National Park City, led by Dan

Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris enjoying some wild time together



Wild words and images – Jackie Morris

“The Lost Words is not only a book. The work is a praise-song, in word and in image, to the natural world. Both Robert and myself have a deep love for the non-human world. As a result of a partnership with Compton Verney Art Gallery & Park, it is also a touring exhibition of word and image. (And Eva John’s Explorer’s Guide, hosted by the John Muir Trust, is inspiring families and educators to bring the words to life in natural settings around the world.)

The Lost Words is about language, the naming of things, the wild words. Our book, and the exhibition, are both aimed at a re-focusing, a movement towards rewilding, not just children, but adults also. Robert has written spells, words that almost demand to be read out loud, shared, and in the ways of magic and by ‘sleight-of-word’ rather than ‘sleight-of-hand’, we are trying to divert the eye away from the human, the urban, and into the nearby wild. For we live surrounded by the wild, even in cities. To name our creatures, trees, birds, to know our stories, is to understand our place in the wild wide world.”

For more information, including a free Explorer’s Guide and poster downloads, visit johnmuirtrust.org/thelostwords



PHOTOGRAPH: NICKY MCGLURE

“Much of this basic naming and knowledge of nearby nature is disappearing because nearby nature itself is vanishing”

Raven-Ellison’s vision, a campaign I’ve supported: a reminder that our cities can be landscapes of exceptional biodiversity and natural energy.

I recently marked the end of my first year on Twitter: with 90,000 followers, and 10-20 million tweet impressions each month, I’ve found it an extraordinarily powerful way of communicating ideas, campaigns and passions to huge audiences. I start each day with posting a landscape, nature or place ‘word of the day’ plus definition at 7am: some are archaic but beautiful (‘holloway’, ‘gill’, ‘bealach’), others modern and grim (‘microplastics’, ‘ghost-nets’); all start long threads of discussion and sharing.

Some people might see this is an exercise in nostalgia, and say we just have to accept change and go with the flow? These days I confess I’m tired of the

‘nostalgia’ objection to ‘nature’, as if the living world is somehow a middle-class luxury rather than a vital necessity. Cultures are defined by what they save as well as what they destroy, and we need now more than ever to take and support strong value-decisions about how we live with the more-than-human world – the wild world, if we want to call it that.

Much of this basic naming and knowledge of nearby nature is disappearing because nearby nature itself is vanishing. Of the names in the book, starlings are down 70 per cent since the 1970s, skylarks are going, newts are going.

To keep the names alive, and the creatures and plants to which they correspond in the minds and stories of children, seems to me urgent work. We will not save what we do not love, and we rarely love what we cannot name or see. □

Under the spell

From Lochinver to Llandudno, groups using the John Muir Award have been reading, writing, drawing and discussing – with *The Lost Words* a key source of inspiration

LOCHINVER PRIMARY SCHOOL, SUTHERLAND

“This morning we hunkered down in a tent in Culag Woods, with the rain drumming everywhere, and explored the concept of *The Lost Words*. Initially matching up names to pictures, we questioned what they all had in common, generating a variety of answers: ‘They all live in Britain.’ ‘They are all living things.’ ‘You can find them outdoors.’

When the answer was revealed, a discussion ensued on why they had been removed from the *Oxford Illustrated Junior Dictionary*. We realised we are lucky in our remote part of the UK. We do use many of these words and refer to these creatures and plants regularly.

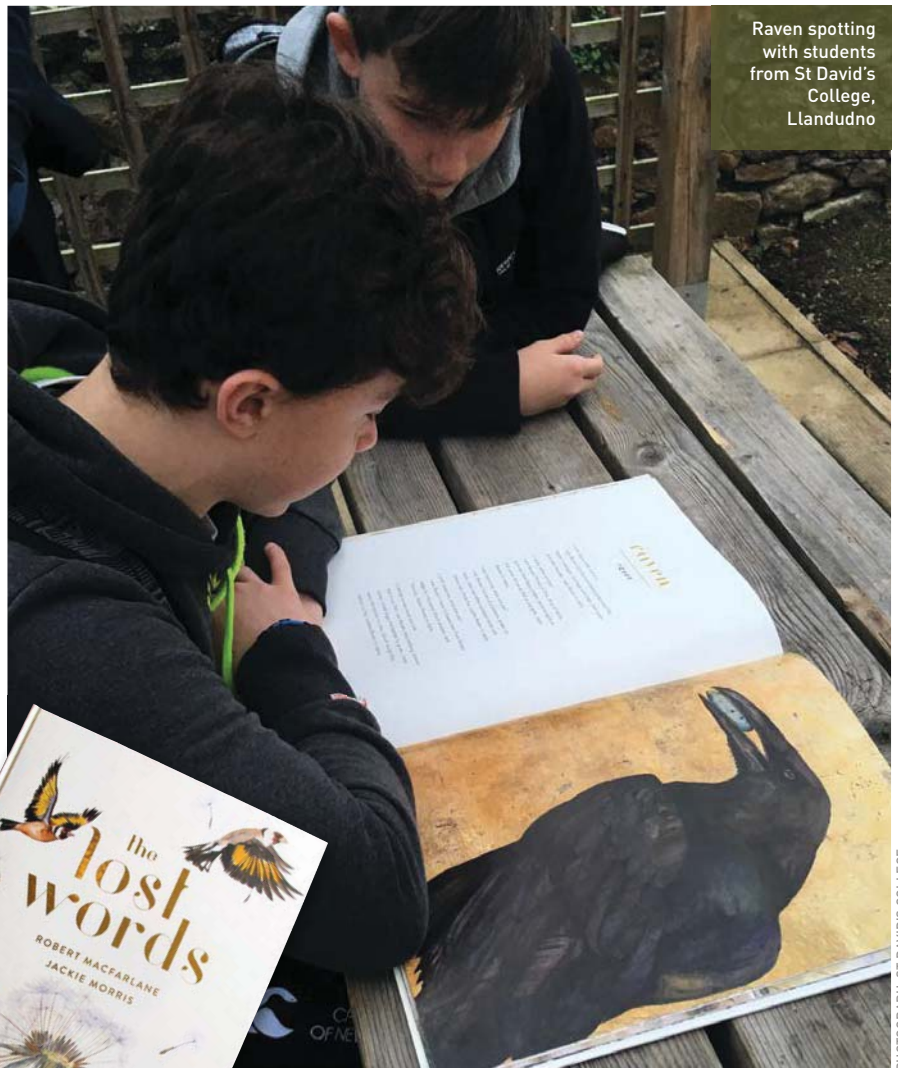
We talked about urbanisation and how that has maybe affected the removal of natural words and led to an increased number of technology-based and more modern words.

This led to talking about how more access to outdoor spaces is needed and that interaction with animals and plants is a good thing to encourage. The consensus was that while it is important to include new and updated words, the natural words should remain too.

The Lost Words book was introduced as a response to the issue, and the introduction read aloud: ‘Once upon a time, words began to vanish from the language of children ...’

By the time the last syllable of the closing sentence was uttered, the group was held in spellbound silence. When asked whether anyone wanted to conjure back one of the lost words with a spell from the book, all were eager. We took it in turns to choose one and read it out loud. It was magical, with the beating of the rain offering a dramatic rhythm to the spoken word.”

Katrina Martin,
Education Manager,
Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape



Raven spotting
with students
from St David's
College,
Llandudno

PHOTOGRAPH: ST DAVID'S COLLEGE

ST DAVID'S COLLEGE, LLANDUDNO

“Through the Outdoor Learning team, St David's College, Llandudno has integrated

The Lost Words into the group kit list for every Outdoor Learning session. It is as valuable to our students, and as necessary, as a map and compass.”

St David's College instructor

CARDONALD PRIMARY SCHOOL, GLASGOW

“Pupils and staff at Cardonald Primary School were so inspired by *The Lost Words* that we planned our whole John Muir Award around its words and artwork. The pupils – identified for particular social, emotional and health and wellbeing needs – used a greenspace opposite the school grounds, and close to where they live, to familiarise themselves with five of the featured words: magpie, raven, heather, ivy and acorn.

Teaching staff used the ‘spells’ as a focus for their art, literacy, numeracy, ICT, science and history lessons. An increase in self-confidence and engagement in other

“We took it in turns to choose one and read it out loud. It was magical, with the beating of the rain offering a dramatic rhythm to the spoken word”

classes has been evident, particularly in reading and ability to speak openly in a class setting.”

**Mrs Hunter, Teacher,
Cardonald Primary School**

MORE LOST WORDS CHAMPIONS

And it's not just John Muir Award Providers that have been moved by the magic of *The Lost Words*. Following a successful crowdfunding campaign by Jane Beaton – a school bus driver and travel consultant from Stirling – to place a copy in every school in Scotland, there are now similar campaigns in Wales, Norfolk, Suffolk, Gloucestershire and Cornwall. It's inspirational stuff – and also likely to be just the beginning. □

About the author
Rob Bushby is the Trust's
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