

GUEST COLUMN – February 2024

Stewardship David Ingram

As a child I was a keen member of the Zoological Society of London's Young Zoologists Club. I remember making the long journey to Whipsnade Zoo to see the critically endangered Pere David's Deer. Extinct in their native China, the deer in Whipsnade were part of British/Chinese collaboration to bring these unique animals back from the brink and reintroduce them into the wild.

Forty years later it was meaningful to travel to Jiangsu Province to visit one of the wetland areas in which the deer are now thriving in their natural habitat.

My visit to see the Pere David's Deer or Milu (as they are known in China) has prompted me to think about my role as Head of College. Environmental learning is integral to our curriculum. We start by fostering a genuine love of nature in the Early Years. As students grow older this develops into knowledge and understanding of biodiversity and interdependence.

We aim to strike the right balance between communicating the profound challenges facing our planet and empowering our students with the belief that they can make a difference. These learning points are not mutually exclusive, but I sometimes wrestle with the extent to which we get this balance right.

Three reflection points from my visit:

1. There is hope. The Pere David's Deer is one of many conservation success stories. It is important to share these with students with the message that it is possible to make a change for good but this requires commitment.
2. Collaboration is important. Good things happen when different countries/ different groups co-operate for a common cause. We need to be intentional about creating meaningful opportunities for our students to develop both the mindset and skill-set of collaboration.
3. Building on the ethos of 'think global, act local', I would also emphasize the need to 'think long term, act now.' As the saying goes, the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, the second-best time is now.

We see value in developing this concept of stewardship in our work with students but recognise that this is easier said than done. Educators often refer to lifelong learning but, in most schools, the lion's share of the collective effort and energy is devoted to the immediate and important priorities of student achievement, exam results and university placements.

A longer-term perspective is rooted in three factors:

Intentionality

We have purposefully set up projects that will take years to fully develop. Two years ago, our College invested in a partnership with Elevated Honey, a social enterprise committed to supporting traditional bee-keeping in Yunnan Province. Their work helps preserve the wild Asian honeybee and provides a source of income for the remote mountain communities.

The project provides a real-world context for the study of life cycles, pollination, biodiversity and interdependence in our Primary School curriculum. When the Year 6 cohort makes the transition to the Senior School, they receive the honey from the hives they have been learning about.

Culture

Just as seeds require certain conditions for growth, stewardship requires an environment that promotes belonging and a sense of investment in the community. Owen Eastwood* writes about this eloquently in *Belonging*. At the heart of his message is accepting that we are responsible for leaving our class/ school/ job/ community in a better place than when we started. Effective school leaders (both staff and students) model this on a daily basis.

We actively nurture this ethos. The Year 7 students who receive the honey from our College beehives are responsible for keeping the project going. They need to cover the costs of maintenance and if there is money left over they can invest in new hives. Either way, their aim is to hand the project on to the next cohort in good shape so that they can continue the tradition.

Diversity

In *Great by Choice* Jim Collins* urges leaders to fire bullets instead of cannonballs until they can be sure of a direct hit. There is wisdom in this (especially for school leaders mindful of initiative overload and well-being). Not all of the proverbial seeds planted 20 years ago grew to be mighty oaks. Stewardship benefits from the diversity that comes from an environment that encourages and empowers students and staff to take action.

Some ideas will fall by the wayside but others will take hold and enhance the community in which they grow.

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*Owen Eastwood, *Belonging: The Ancient Code of Togetherness*, Quercus Publishing, 2021.

*Jim Collins, *Great by Choice*, Random House, 2011.