

Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust Ireland

Report by

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The Value of Agriculture in Therapy and Education

Introduction

I have a background working with people with special needs and was motivated to develop a service that offers alternatives to clinical therapy by the fact that I wanted to work from home and also the belief that there is a huge untapped resource in rural and farming life. I am presently providing animal assisted therapy and animal assisted activities for people with special needs on Finwey Farm, which I set up with my husband as an alternative enterprise four years ago. We have incorporated our dairy cows into this project and hope that by diversifying, it will enable us to continue to develop the farm and provide a good quality of life for our family. By developing this concept and also incorporating nature / wildlife in therapeutic and educational programmes I hope to build on the strength of the existing service and to provide alternative therapeutic approaches for a wider application.

Objectives

The objective of the study was to research the concepts of animal assisted therapy and activities in other countries and to gain further insight into forest schools and associated activities. I was also open to any area loosely related to human/animal interaction.

The Study

As I had been invited to present a paper in Brazil at a conference titled 'People and animals, global perspective for the 21st century', I decided to make the trip a round the world one starting on the 11th September and returning late January. This was only achievable by being accompanied by my husband and two children. The conference gave me a terrific opportunity to meet many practitioners and hear papers and attend workshops on many aspects of human animal interaction. I spent a month backpacking through Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina, which was an invaluable experience and one which I plan to repeat. From there I went to New Zealand for 10 weeks where my husband worked for a large dairy farm and the children attended school. This allowed me the freedom to travel through the North and South Islands looking at animal activities and different therapeutic applications. It also allowed us as a family to try out the full kiwi experience!

On to Melbourne, Australia, where I gained great insight into working with wildlife and open spaces! Santa came to the girls in Adelaide and we managed to avoid the bush fires in Sydney by going to Cairns where the focus was on reptiles. A quick stop in Thailand on the way home and temperatures in the high 30s made us all glad to be home to the winter. And just in time to give birth to Fionn, now 6 months. I have since travelled to England and Denmark to

research forest schools and was delighted to get the opportunity to view these in action.

Key Themes

Initially the key themes were focussing on animal assisted therapy and forest schools but the area of agri-tourism and alternative enterprises came to the fore and have given me an appetite for this area.

The full report gives an analysis of findings under the following headings:

Technical

- Range of facilities/services
- Training
- Applications
- Age groups
- Specific target group versus general
- Special needs versus normal
- Fun versus education

Regulatory

- Staff
- Qualifications
- Insurance
- Health and safety
- Funder's requirements
- Garda clearance

Marketing

- Promotion
- Advertising
- Hosting visits
- Presentations
- Funding
- Grants
- Schedule of fees

Opportunities

- Agri-tourism
- Partnerships
- Transferable
- Nature focus

Conclusions

While there are important conclusions that I can draw from the study, I believe that the experience that Nuffield gave to me and my family has allowed us a once-in-a life-time opportunity to travel and experience new cultures. It also enabled me to take time out to identify what is really important in life and identify a pathway to achieve it. Specific to the study topic:

- There is a lack of relevant research in this area
- Trends in agriculture and in therapeutic services need to be assessed
- The parameters by which we define agriculture need to be broadened

- Cultural differences affect the development of diverse services
- Sustainability in agriculture includes more than economic factors

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