



Best things in life are free

As shown as in September 2020 the latest visitor numbers for Epping Forest are over 14 million people and rising. This is an increase of over 10 million people from this time last year. A popular saying is 'The best thing in life are free'.

Natural capital is everything nature provides us for free. The popularity of the forest shows that the value of our local natural capital has significantly increased this year. Particularly important in these difficult times, as a strong connection to the natural world improves our emotional well-being and stops feelings of social isolation. Also going outdoors helps support people suffering from mental health conditions like attention disorders, mood disorders, and different forms of anxiety.

But the problem with something being free is that it is not always valued and respected. At Suntrap, close to our hearts is the fundamental belief in protecting our natural capital. When we abuse nature; destroying ecosystems and habitats without much thought to the consequences, the damage won't go away. When we disregard our natural capital it will become unsustainable. This time of year, mushrooms are in abundance in the forest but taking living things out of the forest is asset stripping.

To protect the forest byelaws are in place. One example introduced in the 1870s prohibited the taking or moving any substance in or from the Forest, thus giving fungi protected status, making it illegal to pick mushrooms. The City of London Corporation which manages the forest has warned that its biodiversity is threatened by foraging gangs that harvest huge numbers of fungi with the aim of selling them on to high-end restaurants.

Suntrap educates visitors to the centre that the only thing you take in the forest is a photograph, leave only footprints and keep your memories. One solution is to give

visitors the chance to have a close-up experience and learn more about these vital living organisms which are a key part of the forest.

Head of Suntrap, Kerry Rolison, explains: “During our refurbishment closure we’ve made good use of some of our fallen logs that are in cool, shady spots by inserting ‘mushroom plugs’. “These are small wooden dowels that have been inoculated with mycelium of edible fungi. To harvest will typically take 12-18 months so we’re looking forward to watching mushrooms emerge from cracks and channels in the wood, ready for our reopening.”

The cost of not protecting our forest can have far-reaching consequences for future generations. It’s vital that we continue to educate our children on being ‘nature’s guardians’.