Think Like an Ecologist

Instructions for Teachers & Task Leaders

Scene Setting

Ecologists are scientists who study plants, animals and habitats to understand how nature works and how it can be protected. They don't just work in remote places, ecologists study wildlife in parks, towns, coastlines and even very small spaces.

In this session, pupils learn what an ecologist does day-to-day, the kinds of tools they use, and how careful observation and recording help protect nature. This activity helps pupils understand how everyday skills are used in nature-related careers.

Activity:

This activity allows pupils to experience one of the key parts of an ecologist's job, observing and recording wildlife, using the school grounds.

Step 1: Choose a survey spot

Pupils work individually or in pairs to choose a small area to observe, such as:

- a patch of grass
- a tree, hedge or planter
- a wall, fence, drain or paved edge

(Spaces can be as small as 1 metre and work equally well in paved or green school grounds.)

Step 2: Observe carefully

Give pupils 5 minutes to quietly observe their area.

Ask them to look for:

- Living things (plants, insects, birds, moss, lichens)
- Signs of wildlife (feathers, nests, holes, webs, droppings)
- Seasonal clues (buds, fallen leaves, insects active or inactive)

Step 3: Record findings

Pupils record what they notice by:

- drawing what they see
- making a simple list or tally
- writing short labels

Emphasise that ecologists don't always find lots of animals, noticing small details is just as important.

Green Jobs for Nature

Think Like an Ecologist

Instructions for Teachers & Task Leaders

Step 4: Skills spotting
Ask pupils to identify which skills they used during the survey, such as:

- Observation
- Patience
- Careful recording
- Curiosity
- Working quietly and responsibly

Step 5: In the UK and Europe, there are several laws that are in place to protect wildlife but imagine there were none. If you were a decision maker in UK law and legislation, what laws would you write to protect UK wildlife? In small groups discuss:

- What species (if any) should be protected?
- Should some species have higher protection than others? What data would be needed to decide this?
- What activities should be illegal towards protected species?
- What do you think are appropriate punishments for breaking the laws you have come up with?

Careers Linked to This Session
This session links to a range of careers that involve studying and protecting nature, including:

- Ecologist: studies wildlife and habitats to understand and protect them
- Environmental Scientist: uses data and research to help solve environmental problems
- Conservation Officer: helps manage and protect natural areas
- Wildlife Surveyor: records plants and animals to monitor changes over time
- Environmental Consultant: advises how work and development can reduce harm to nature

Curriculum Links

- Science: Living things, habitats, seasonal change
- Geography: Local environments, human impact
- Careers Education: Exploring job roles and transferable skills

Reflection (Extension)
Choose one:

- What was the smallest or most surprising thing you noticed during your survey?
- Why do you think ecologists need to be patient and careful when working outdoors?
- How might recording nature over time help protect wildlife?

Green Jobs for Nature