**OUTDOOR WORSHIP at a Nature Reserve**

Summer is a good time to worship outdoors whenever possible. Step outside of your church building on a sunny Sunday, if spontaneity goes down well with your congregation - but don’t forget to pick up a couple of chairs for those who find standing challenging. Alternatively, a pre-planned and pre-organised excursion can also involve an afternoon trip and picnic to the local park or nature reserve. It’s always inspiring and invigorating to worship in the open air and amongst God’s creation. The experience can also be thought-provoking!

**Nature Reserves**

Here the focus is on Nature Reserves which are provided exclusively to protect species for their own sake. This means that they differ from a National Park, which is provided for public recreation for the most part.

Nature Reserves are places which are provided to preserve and protect certain plant or animal species or both. Find the Nature Reserve nearest to where you live. Check who owns the land on which the Nature Reserve is created. The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and RSPB, for example, are working hard to reduce and mitigate the effects of climate change in order to help wildlife to cope. They are developing our nature reserves to protect them against the impacts of rising temperatures and sea levels. They are advocating for changes within nature conservation policy and devising strategies which will cut emissions in the UK and EU which will help people lead greener, more sustainable lifestyles every day.

**An Outdoor Worship Service**

The following are suggestions for inclusion, depending on your context or denomination.

*Bible reading*

Choose a biblical passage both as a focus and to ensure the worship is grounded in Scripture. The most chosen passages are Genesis 1.1-25; Psalm 24.1; Psalm 50.12; Matthew 22.15-22; 37-40. These cover the most common theological arguments which underpin our felt responsibility to care for creation, even in the face of climate change.

*Reflection*

In the Genesis 1 account of creation, God blesses humankind before telling them to have ‘dominion’ over the land, sea, and every living creature. This has been interpreted as permission to rule and plunder for our own benefit. Dominion language can all to quickly sound like the colonial empire-builders of the past, yet it is vital that we see this command within the context of the first chapter of Genesis. Just before this ‘dominion’ call is made, humankind is created in the image of God. We are the image bearers of God and are called to reflect God’s character in our lives. Thus, dominion takes a different slant. It is no longer about ruling over creation for our own self-benefit, but instead cherishing it and tending it in the way God would. It is also a reminder that we are made in the image of a communal, trinitarian God, where Father, Son and Holy Spirit live as a community of being. This reminds us of our calling to live in a way that enables all to flourish in community.

Here the focus is on the community of creation. We have long been aware of the interdependence of our natural world and the species and creatures which live in it. Local nature reserves concentrate on providing the habitat needed for the protection of the specific plants and animals found growing and living there, each with their own pattern of life cycle and regeneration. We can include these patterns in our worship, from new life and new growth in the spring, blooming and flourishing in the summer, migration and leaf fall in the autumn and a rest during the winter months.

According to Wikipedia, there are 215 national nature reserves in England with a total area of 879sq.km. or 339 sq. mi. There are some differences between the regulations for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which are separately managed. The reserves are spread throughout England from Lindisfarne in Northumberland to The Lizard in Cornwall. Many national nature reserves contain nationally important populations of rare [flowers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flower), [ferns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fern) and [mosses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moss), [butterflies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butterflies) and other [insects](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insect), and nesting and wintering [birds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bird).

There are now over 1,050 [local nature reserves](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_nature_reserve) in England. They range from windswept coastal headlands, ancient woodlands and flower-rich meadows to former inner-city railways, long-abandoned landfill sites and industrial areas now re-colonized by wildlife. In total, they cover almost 40,000 ha (99,000 acres)—a natural resource which makes an important contribution to England's [biodiversity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biodiversity). The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust looks after over 100 nature reserves across Yorkshire from Spurn Point on the Humber to Ingleborough in the Yorkshire Dales.

As we meet outside it’s appropriate to recognise that connection with Christ’s creation in our worship is also deeply missional. Andy Atkins, CEO of A Rocha UK, has stated categorically that creation care speaks into all the marks of mission (Grove booklet MEv134 Climate Action as Mission). To talk about creation as a gift from God is to preach the good news and to teach new believers about Scripture and Christian faith. To take practical action, as individuals and churches, to prevent further ecological damage is to respond to the real and present human need with loving service. To speak out against some of the structures contributing to the climate emergency, and to partake in prophetic activism, is to help transform these unjust structures. And to take climate action in all these forms is to work towards safeguarding the integrity of creation.

A prayer for nature reserves

Lord of creation,

You have placed us on the earth to care for it,

And call us to be co-workers with Christ your Son.

Bless those who work in our nature reserves and National Parks,

In our Areas of Outstanding Beauty and Sites of Scientific Interest,

And all who are custodians of our landscape,

Of the plants, animals, and their habitats.

Lord, hear us,

**Lord, graciously hear us.**

**Further Resources**

[Outdoor Worship](https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/outdoor-worship) – Church of England webpage with guidance and resources

[Our Worship](https://www.leeds.anglican.org/our-faith/environment/resources-for-my-church/our-worship/#Outdoor%20Worship) – Diocese of Leeds Environment webpage on worship with Outdoor Worship resources, template services, creation care prayers and hymn lists.

[*A Time for Creation* 2020](https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/time-creation) - Liturgical resources for Creation and the Environment to be found in this Church of England publication.

[*Outdoor Worship* Book](https://engageworship.org/store/product/outdoor-worship-book) – Engage Worship A resource book of ideas an inspiration to help mixed-age groups, families and churches engage with God in his world. This 52 page, full colour A5 book features space for your own "field notes", plus biblical reflections and articles on how we can better relate to the earth. Purchase the book for £6 or download the PDF version £5.