



Her Majesty's Prison Craiginches

Wild places on the 'inside' and the 'outside'

November 2010



Background

Working with prisoners from HMP Craiginches, Aberdeen City Council Countryside Ranger Service has supported 32 men serving custodial sentences to achieve their John Muir Discovery Award. The 'Bridges Project' was designed as a bridge between life inside Craiginches and in the participants' home communities. Four six-week courses have been successfully delivered. One prisoner, speaking on local radio, explained that;

"The Bridges Project is a chance for prisoners to learn new skills whilst serving their prison sentences and then put them into good use on release"

The aim of this project is for prisoners to develop links with partner agencies while on the 'inside', to enable them to use the skills which they have learned and wish to develop further, on the 'outside'.

"It gives you something to work towards, for in here and when we get out"

Wild places on the 'inside' and the 'outside'

Each six week project had to be prison-based, so without actually visiting it initially the groups used maps and research to find out about their wild place, Kincorth Hill Local Nature Reserve. The participants developed skills in map and compass work and learned how to use a GPS. Using these skills each participant was able to learn about where the Reserve was in relation to the prison and his own community, with the expectation that they will visit and engage with the reserve on release.

Within the prison grounds the groups spent time at 'the Craigie Patch', an area of grassland with limited natural qualities, but which gave space for being outside, in the fresh air, to do some activities.

The participants completed a species survey on a square metre of the Craigie Patch to find out more about it. Through analysing what they found, the participants learned about the biodiversity of their 'inside' outdoor space.

"I was genuinely surprised by the amount of different fauna and flora ie grass, daisies, moss, mushrooms and worms..."

Developing skills

After researching and learning about John Muir's adventures, participants used the Craigie Patch to practice and develop their own survival skills. Activities such as shelter building, knot work and cooking on an open fire provided the opportunity for them to work on their group skills.

"We worked with each other throughout the encounter. Teamwork!"

The weekly shelter building task initially proved a real challenge. However, as the sessions progressed, the prisoners' teamwork and communication skills developed and enabled them to successfully complete the task in a fraction of the time.

"When we first went outside we were all squabbling and arguing about what we wanted to do... we had to get our heads together... we had to learn how to work as a team"



“Even though we have our difference of opinion, we have bonded over the John Muir Award”

Alongside their outdoor activities the participants were involved in community studies classes. Continual discussions about survival, human needs and personal impact, gave the men the opportunity to reflect on their role in, and impact on their own communities and environment. They were able to express feelings and thoughts and make a connection between green spaces, their communities and themselves. Many of the men expressed a desire to explore their local Aberdeen wild places after release.



Giving something back

Throughout their Award the groups aimed to have minimum impact on their environment and ‘leave no trace’ was a key approach adopted during the activities. The participants also chose to make a difference for wild places and the community by creating wildflower planters for a local primary school. The prisoners hoped it would encourage the school to create their own mini wild place within the school grounds. This also continued the connection between environments on the inside and the outside of the prison.

Sharing through media

In a multi partner approach, the outdoor based activities were just one element of The Bridges Project. The participants were also involved in media production in both video and radio. Throughout each six week programme, the groups worked with Station House Media Unit (SHMU) learning the mechanics of radio presentation and production and broadcasted their experiences via the local community radio. Alongside their media project, participants captured and shared their John Muir Award experience by taking photos of their activities and a picture board was created for the communal notice board. This let other prisoners know what they were up to and aimed to inspire them to get involved with the Bridges Project.

Successful Bridges

This ambitious project demonstrates the flexibility of the John Muir Award and highlights the strength of working partnerships, in this case the Scottish Prison Service, the Aberdeen City Council Countryside Ranger Service and Community Learning & Development Team, and the Criminal Justice Social Work Team. The project had a retention rate for prisoners of an incredible 80% compared with the average retention on prison courses of approximately 10%. This is a remarkable success for all involved and demonstrates the value placed on the project by participants.

A Future

With volunteering opportunities set up, the plan is that the participants will continue to engage with the natural environment after their time at Craiginches. Since release, a number of the Bridges participants have volunteered with the Ranger Service, doing practical work at Kincorth Hill and on community based projects, including the creation of an outdoor classroom (pictured above). Others have continued their links with SHMU, which has involved taking over the weekly show, ‘Around with a Ranger’.



Whilst reflecting on the successes of the Bridges Project on SHMU radio, Audrey Mooney, Governor of Craiginches, commented that;

It gives people skills and abilities, helps them recognise those areas that perhaps they didn’t recognise before. I think the great opportunity for the people taking part is to go out and start utilising those skills and abilities and to have the confidence to do so”

For some of the men the opportunity to take part in the John Muir Award project helped give direction and meaning:

“A lot of the guys have nothing to get out for, with this we have something to get out for... something to look forward to”

“Thank you for showing us that there is something else out there...”