

## Building team spirit and skills on the Tay

### How wild places help unlock skills, confidence and employability potential



Giraffe is a charity and social enterprise in Perth set up to help people facing barriers to mainstream opportunities. The organisation works with people aged 16+ with a range of support needs including autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities and mental ill health, supporting individuals to achieve goals through work placements and activities that promote personal development and wellbeing.



“Our hope is that by introducing the John Muir Award we will be able to add more of an educational element to what we do, and at the same time provide participants with a greater sense of achievement through gaining a widely recognised certificate.”

Increasing environmental awareness and promoting the benefits of time spent in nature were identified as organisational priorities, so delivering the John Muir Award provided a meaningful goal to work towards, building on previous outdoor activities. As some service users struggle to complete a lot of written work, engaging in the outdoors also offered plenty of hands-on, practical learning opportunities, with the flexibility of the Award’s Four Challenges allowing sessions to be tailored to fit the group’s needs.

#### Meaningful activities and new skills

The River Tay and surrounding woodlands, hillsides and parkland offered participants experiences of local wild places. Exposure to new activities and opportunities for skills development were woven into sessions ranging from bushcraft, orienteering and canoeing trips, to getting creative with natural materials - with the group enjoying hunting for leaves, twigs and seeds to make artwork whilst also learning about the forest floor.

Collectively, the group committed over 50 hours to the Conserve Challenge, taking responsibility for their local wild places through planting wildflower seeds, learning about Leave No Trace and engaging in green travel initiatives. Litter picking on the Tay - using canoes to retrieve items directly from the river as well as walking the banks - had a significant impact, with the group removing 11 large bags of litter from the local environment.

A range of positive outcomes were realised through the project, by staff and participants, summarised below with feedback from group leader Laura Connacher at Giraffe.



### **Connecting people and nature after lockdown**

Following long periods at home during Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, the opportunity to connect and socialise with others brought significant benefits, with the value of feeling part of a team referenced frequently in group feedback. Whilst some had felt nervous at the prospect of meeting with others indoors, outdoor sessions offered a more comfortable and safe setting.

“All participants felt that taking part in the Award had a positive effect on their mental wellbeing and also their physical health (we did a lot of walking!).”

### **Overcoming fears, growing confidence**

The variety of activities and sense of team spirit provided opportunities for individuals to challenge themselves in a supportive environment.

*“One participant was terrified of water and can’t swim, so was initially reluctant to get in a canoe. The whole team gave her loads of encouragement and reassurance which was so lovely to see. Although she was still really nervous, she eventually decided to give it a go in a tandem. She ended up having the best time out on the river collecting litter with the group, and was so proud of herself for what she had achieved. This ended up being the highlight of her John Muir Award and she is now much more confident in her own abilities.”*



### **Demonstrating skills & supporting employability**

Learning about trees, lichens and indicator species were highlights for several participants, giving opportunities to try new things and build knowledge. Having these achievements recognised through gaining a John Muir Award has supported individuals to demonstrate their transferable skills and learning. For one participant studying Environmental Science at college, wildlife identification skills went hand-in-hand with her studies, with the Award making a welcome addition to her CV. Since completing a John Muir Award, another participant has been offered his first full time paid job, with recognition that engaging with the outdoor group boosted his confidence levels and contributed to his success – a fantastic achievement.

### **A leader’s perspective**

*“For me, the best part about taking this group was witnessing a positive change in all of the participants. Seeing them grow in confidence, get excited about learning new things and tackling new challenges was really rewarding. It was great to be able to share some of my own interests with the group - it’s always so enjoyable teaching people things that you are passionate about yourself.”*

Photographs provided courtesy of Giraffe