

Youth Work, Nature & the John Muir Award



Youth work helps enable young people to unlock their potential, develop their voice and build positive futures. It takes a holistic approach, with dialogue and relationship building at its core. Youth work approaches have three defining features: young people choose to participate; the work must build from where young people are; and the young person and the youth worker are recognised as partners in a learning process.¹

“Youth work is neither social care nor formal teaching. It is an intervention that combines elements of both in the context of creating learning and supportive opportunities for young people.... It creates opportunities for free association and fun, empowerment and enfranchisement and critical thinking.” - Lifelong Learning UK & Unite the Union²

Use this document to explore:

- why taking youth work outdoors matters
- how the John Muir Award can add value to young people’s experiences
- links to relevant initiatives, research and information

Why take youth work outdoors?

Wild places can inspire and stimulate, providing a range of multi-sensory and memorable experiences and an opportunity to take a new perspective on the world around us. Getting out into nature provides space for people to relax, get active, be adventurous and feel free. From urban greenspaces to National Parks, taking youth work outdoors can create opportunities for young people to try new things, have fun and gain a sense of place, while also feeling the health and wellbeing benefits that fresh air and connecting with nature offer.³

The John Muir Award

The John Muir Award is an environmental award scheme that can help deliver youth work outdoors. It encourages people to connect with, enjoy and care for wild places. When launched in 1997, it was inspired by youth work practice, though is also available to adults and families. It offers a flexible way to recognise achievement and contributes to personal development, employability, attainment and health and wellbeing agendas.

The John Muir Award can motivate young people to engage in youth programmes; offer a focus for developing knowledge and skills; create opportunities to connect with and give something back to nature and local communities; and challenge young people to set their own goals, lead others and use their initiative. It can support youth work approaches and engagement frameworks such as the UK Youth Social Development Journey⁴ with opportunities for progressing from participation to leadership.

The John Muir Award can be used in conjunction with other youth Awards, such as National Citizen Service, Youth Achievement Awards, Arts Awards and the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award. The John Muir Trust is a member of the Awards Network⁵ in Scotland, raising awareness of the value of non-formal learning.



Adapted from UK Youth’s Social Development Journey

¹ YouthLink Scotland - The nature and purpose of youth work: www.youthlinkscotland.org

² Lifelong Learning UK & Unite the Union (2010): www.cywu.org.uk/assets/content_pages/187799973_Benefits_of_Youth_Work.pdf

³ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (2016): <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/POST-PN-0538#fullreport>

⁴ UK Youth: www.ukyouth.org/who-we-are/#social-development-journey

⁵ Awards Network: www.awardsnetwork.org/

How the John Muir Award is used to support youth work approaches in different settings

Across the UK, young people participate in various settings, including youth clubs, community learning programmes, schools, environmental charities and through residential.

Youth centres and residential activity

The Barn Youth Centre in Glasgow takes an integrated and outdoors-focused approach to working with young people, aiming to break negative cycles of inequalities in the local community by giving young people a voice and expanding their opportunities. Outdoor residential activity and achieving a John Muir Award provide a useful focus for skills that can be transferred to home life, including building confidence, social bonds and resilience.

“For us, it’s important that these young people are taken out of their immediate environment in the Gorbals. These huge landscapes and stunning views are completely different and inspire a state of awe. We see young people becoming completely relaxed, a weight off their shoulders, enjoying the space and freedom that these places offer. It’s our golden time for youth work - being out in these wild places with the young people. It creates a space for dialogue, for conversation around a campfire, which is essential for good relationship building between youth workers and young people.” Joe McConnell, Youth Worker



© The Barn Youth Centre

Independence is a strong theme to the residential, supported by an approach of ‘remote supervision’ with staff setting a few boundaries and creating space for young people to explore in their own way. These wild experiences provide a talking point in job, training and further education interviews, supporting young people to demonstrate their capabilities.

Find out more at:

[Employability & the John Muir Award](#) Search ‘John Muir Award employability’

The [#BrilliantResidential](#) campaign demonstrates the positive impacts of high-quality residential learning for young people and staff: <http://learningaway.org.uk>

Care provision

New Reflexions provides homes for looked after children in England and Wales. In Shropshire, the service provides varied and stimulating outdoor life experiences for the young people in their care. Adventurous pursuits enable individuals to challenge themselves and develop confidence. Activities such as identifying and tracking wildlife and creating wildlife habitats provide purposeful and meaningful tasks that improve self-esteem and build aspirations.

“Working towards his John Muir Award gave X huge motivation to learn and got him talking about what he might want to do in the future. Prior to this he was extremely disconnected from others and unable to focus on tasks. Our use of the Award gave him structure and an outcome to be proud of, resulting from his passion for being outdoors.”

Caz Wood, Deputy Care Manager

Find out more about how the Award is used to support people facing disadvantage in a variety of settings in [Inclusion, Wild Places and the John Muir Award](#) Search ‘John Muir Award inclusion wild places’

Alternative curriculum and schools partnerships

“Increasingly, we are seeing youth workers work alongside teachers and others who support children and young people, and the sector has a key role to play in helping us to achieve our vision of excellence and equity for every child and young person.”

Graeme Logan, Strategic Director Education Scotland⁶

School-based youth work

Having a dedicated youth work officer based within Amlwch Secondary School in Wales provides a unique opportunity to support student needs and influence positive change. The John Muir Award is used as a vehicle to help pupils tackle a range of personal and social issues through an extra-curricular project. Over the year, participants visit a variety of wild places across Anglesey, creating opportunities for play, relaxation and practical work with local environmental partners. Students opt-in to getting involved in lunchtimes and after-school, but many also use their wild experiences as inspiration for projects in Art, English, Geography and other subjects, reinforcing their learning and encouraging sharing with peers.

“John Muir Award activity provides the ‘journey’, the ‘excitement’, the ‘buy-in’ that makes students want to get involved ... Over time, students feel more connected, more relaxed and more open to communicating with staff as well as other students – this is when we can really support them.”

Jessie Hughes, In School Youth Worker

Alternative curriculum approaches

Clackmannanshire Council Education Community Learning and Development Team aim to strengthen young people’s capacity to achieve their full potential through working in partnership with local schools and offering holiday programmes for hard to reach young people. Using the John Muir Award gives a focus to their activities. For many individuals, getting away from the classroom can make a big difference, opening up opportunities to make friends, try new things - such as camping, outdoor cooking, star-gazing and geo-caching - and to simply enjoy spending time in nature.

“The John Muir Award has enabled Clackmannanshire Council Education Community Learning and Development team to develop positive relationships with young people who have a tendency to lack confidence and self-esteem. Introducing them to outdoor learning often has a profound impact on their self-belief and can facilitate a significant sense of personal and group achievement. We have seen first-hand how young people have changed and developed, both emotionally and in their willingness and capacity to learn and engage with natural heritage and the wild environment.”

Mary Fox, Team Leader



© Clackmannanshire Council

Find out more about how the John Muir Award can help deliver educational outcomes in our [National Curriculum](#) and [Curriculum for Excellence](#) publications online.
Search ‘John Muir Award curriculum’

College and access programmes

For colleges working with young people for whom English is not their first language, language barriers, social isolation and low confidence can prevent students from feeling part of their local community. Increasing opportunities to get outdoors can help develop a sense of community connection whilst building personal, social and language skills.

East Kent College takes a holistic approach to their education programme for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students through taking learning outdoors. Working towards a John Muir Award provides students with opportunities to improve their literacy and communication skills by engaging with local partners and members of the public whilst trying a range of new activities, from pebble art to caring for spider orchids. Breaking down cultural barriers has been challenging - including introducing the concept of conservation and encouraging students to consider others' perspectives - but beneficial in supporting young people as they find their place in the world.



© East Kent College

On Glasgow Clyde College's ESOL course, young asylum seekers and refugees learn to access greenspace and get beyond the high-rise flats and supported accommodation where they live. Spending time in nature helps improve students' wellbeing, including feelings of freedom, enjoyment, appreciation and relaxation. Teacher Lyn Ma explains: *"Through the activities we do towards the Award, we find out just how many things the young people can do. They are able to showcase skills they are unable to express in the classroom and that are often masked by language barriers. We have discovered incredible botanists in the group and some with fantastic survival skills. Through sharing their abilities in navigation and shelter building, for example, the young people's confidence grows."*

Find out more about the [Glasgow Clyde College programme](#) on the John Muir Award website. Search 'John Muir Award sense of freedom'

Youth justice

Digging snake pits, rebuilding wooden bridges and constructing bug hotels are just some of the tasks completed by young people working with the Essex Youth Offending Service. Staff became interested in taking groups outdoors after learning about the benefits nature offers in terms of reducing anti-social behaviour and promoting positive physical and mental health.

"It was inspiring to watch and realise the benefits of the young people working, relaxing and de-stressing in a natural environment. For the young people to realise that such outdoor spaces exist for mindfulness and contemplation is just fantastic."

Karen Sinclair, Referral Order Co-ordinator

Using the John Muir Award as a framework for their outdoor activity contributes to many priorities of the youth offending team, including creating opportunities for education and skills development; recognising young people's achievements whilst increasing their respect for nature; improving interpersonal and communication skills; and restorative justice by way of giving back to the community. Seeing tangible outcomes from practical conservation projects has helped the group appreciate how worthwhile their efforts are, increasing each individual's sense of pride in giving something back to the local community by way of reparation.

Youth groups

Creating opportunities for young people to get to know wild places on their doorsteps and inspire them to take action for the environment has been at the heart of the Belfast Hills Partnership's work with a girls group from St Gall's G.A.C.. Through the club's summer youth scheme, the John Muir Award was used to frame a series of treks, camps and conservation projects, with the aim of challenging young people to consider their perspectives on wildlife in Belfast.



© Belfast Hills Partnership

Capturing their Award experiences with the help of a local street artist led to a lasting legacy for the community - a bright, wildflower-covered public mural. Through this artwork, the young people hope to encourage enjoyment and appreciation of nature in the city, and to inspire locals to think about their own impacts on wildlife.

"The primary aim of this youth empowerment project was to help young people gain new skills by learning about their local environment. The girls came up with the idea for the campaign themselves and were encouraged to develop their message through a number of workshops. I have been blown away by their commitment to the project and the stunning art piece they have created. I've enjoyed watching them grow and learn over the summer, and ultimately develop a huge sense of pride in what they have achieved by working as a team."

Jo Boylan, Youth Outreach Officer

Personal development and peer-to-peer learning

Abroadship's 'Step In Their Shoes' project combines youth exchange and nature engagement as a model for experiential learning and fostering cultural acceptance. Young people from across Europe come together on outdoor programmes based around hiking and running expeditions in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. These trips promote tolerance, with immersion in wild places creating space for shared experiences, dialogue and challenging cultural stereotypes.

The John Muir Award provides a framework to support the young people's personal development, helping to instil a sense of environmental responsibility and encourage reflection on their own behaviour, as well as the actions and attitudes of others.



© Abroadship

One participant commented:

"I found out that nature has a big 'hug' for us and offers us the opportunity to express our feelings more easily and reconsider who we are and what we want to do. I felt such a freedom there especially under the stars that I almost got lost in myself, feelings and thoughts. During these days I decided to not use social networks, internet, mobile phone and only use my photo camera, so as to fully experience what I was living."

Young People & nature

Young people and nature connection is a topic generating a wealth of debate and discussion across a range of sectors. To help inform this conversation, the John Muir Trust is collating:

- key research and feedback from young people and organisations that work with them
- examples of youth engagement, such as the #iwill campaign and Kick the Dust
- outcomes and interest generated through Government-backed themed years - Year of Young People 2018 (Scotland) and Year of Green Action 2019 (UK)
- stories and testimonials direct from young people

Find out more at our [Young People and Nature webpages](#).

Search 'John Muir Trust young people nature'

Examples of national campaigns and projects

#Dustkickers - A group of 17-24 year olds has helped Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) allocate £10.4 million to UK projects, aiming to ensure real change is generated in the heritage sector with youth participation becoming an integral part of how organisations deliver their goals.⁷ In 2017, the John Muir Trust became a consortium partner in one of 12 projects, 'Keeping It Wild' in London. Go online for the latest [project updates and stories](#) from the young people involved.

ReRoute - a co-design partnership⁸ between Scottish Natural Heritage and Young Scot is helping encourage more young people to enjoy the outdoors. Projects have included forming Scotland's Youth Biodiversity Panel and creating Freshspace animations with young women to help others make the most of Scotland's outdoors for their health and wellbeing.

#iwill - The [#iwill](#)⁹ campaign aims to make social action a part of life for 10-20 year olds. High quality social action, through activities such as volunteering, campaigning and fundraising, brings benefits to both communities and young people themselves. The John Muir Trust supports the campaign, extending its original pledge to continue inspiring social action from at least 150,000 young people by the end of 2020.

Want to get involved in the John Muir Award?

Visit our website www.johnmuiraward.org:

- watch a 10 minute introductory film
- download a John Muir Award Information Handbook
- find case studies and resources to help get started
- find your John Muir Award contact for support and advice

#TheBrawOutdoorQuestion

During Scotland's Year of Young People 2018, #TheBrawOutdoorQuestion was a micro-survey co-designed with young people on the topic of nature and the outdoors. Here's a sample of young people's responses about why nature matters to them - read the [results summary](#) online.

"Being outdoors is good for the soul! Keeps me healthy and therefore happy and reminds me of the simple things in life :)"

"Gives a sense of perspective and connection with the greater world. Allows you to get away from the day to day worries of life and refreshes your brain."

"I get this feeling of freedom and tranquillity away from the skyscrapers and noise of the city."

"Fresh air, endorphins, fun, mud, sunshine. Free. What's not to like?"



© Penny Dixie/London Wildlife Trust

⁷ www.heritagefund.org.uk/news/kicking-storm-young-people-shake-heritage

⁸ www.young.scot/campaigns/national/reroute

⁹ www.iwill.org.uk/