

Turriff Youth Services partnership Young people benefit from 'nature for all' approach



The Cairngorms National Park Authority has promoted the John Muir Award as a key environmental engagement and outdoor learning scheme since 2003. Here, Alan Smith – Outdoor Learning Officer for Cairngorms National Park Authority and John Muir Award Cairngorms Manager – reports on how the John Muir Award helps promote partnership working, benefits young people, and contributes towards vital National Park outreach work.



An important part of the Cairngorms National Park Authority Learning and Inclusion work is to take the message of caring for Scotland's wild places to groups beyond the National Park boundary, helping to ensure that the Cairngorms is a 'Park for All'. The John Muir Award is a key tool that can help achieve this aim, demonstrating how everyone can enjoy, care for and benefit from wild places.

Recently, the Aberdeenshire Council Youth Services team approached the local authority's Ranger Service to suggest a partnership approach to delivering a John Muir Discovery Award for a group of referred teenagers from the Turriff area of Aberdeenshire.

The group consisted of five mixed gender young people aged 12-16 who were being supported by both Youth Services and Turriff Children and Families Social Work Team. The John Muir Award offered a flexible and adaptable means of engaging the group within a larger programme of work designed to help participants with:

- social skills including boundaries and peer relationships
- coping strategies and emotional intelligence
- self-esteem and self-confidence



"The John Muir Award was chosen to give the young people an experience in a different environment, using the outdoors as a tool to address the aims and needs of the group as well as offering the young people a chance to achieve a certificate. It was also a way of introducing the outdoors to the group as an environment to discover, relax and seek to spend time in."
Anne Gibb, Youth and Family Services Team

Delgaty Woods provided an ideal location, local to Turriff where the group were based and offering a good diversity of habitats for delivery of environmental education sessions. The programme was deliberately designed to give variety and offer young people a range of positive experiences to help keep motivation high.

Explorations on foot provided the group the chance to familiarise themselves with the area and created space for discussion about the idea of wild places and what they mean to us. Over a number of sessions, the young people learned to identify native trees and wildflowers and made clay creations inspired by the plants and fungi that they observed. They developed bushcraft skills including responsible fire-lighting, erecting a tarpaulin shelter, knots and wood-carving skills.

Awareness of caring for nature also grew - learning about John Muir, his life, work and legacy of establishing the first National Parks to protect wild places helped to frame acts of kindness towards nature in the local area, such as rescuing frogspawn that was in danger of drying out and relocating it to a nearby pond. Campfires created spaces for sharing, with each other as well as families, staff and friends.

Staff took part in the Award as well – allowing them to share the experience with the teenagers. This helped to reinforce positive relationships between the young people and adults which in turn resulted in the group running longer than initially planned; a very positive outcome for the Youth Services Team.



A focus on completing a John Muir Award helped to cement dynamics in the group and being outdoors naturally diffused any tensions that could otherwise have escalated indoors. The young people showed enthusiasm and interest in the woods themselves as well as in skills the Rangers taught them, with desired outcomes met unconsciously by the group through a spirit of fun and new experiences.

Staff identified a number of positive outcomes from the project, including:

- Improving communication skills and team work
- Creating opportunities for peer learning
- Building friendships and social experiences
- Increasing health and wellbeing
- Improving confidence, self-esteem and self-worth
- Developing practical life and problem-solving skills
- Building resilience and self-regulation
- Gaining a sense of achievement and a nationally-recognised award

The young people also recognised the benefits they gained from participating:

“This has given me more freedom... it’s been fun as we have been outside and I have been more tired... it’s been fun, relaxing, calm, warm and overall quite cool.” Favourite memories included lighting fires and saving tadpoles *“because I really stuck in and I done that.”*

Working in partnership was seen as an effective and successful approach for achieving the original aims and objectives of the programme. Basing it outdoors also ensured that both the young people and staff gained first-hand experience of how nature offers something for everyone, no matter where it’s accessed - from back garden, to local woodlands, to National Park.

“From the Ranger Service perspective this was an excellent partnership; working with the Youth Services Team meant that our respective skills and qualifications complemented each other and the young people benefitted greatly from this partnership.”

Doug Gooday, Ranger Service

“From Social Work point of view, the knowledge and experience the Ranger Service contributed was valued. The teens too valued the Rangers’ input; the relationship between the group and the Rangers was excellent, with the teens keenly listening and taking on board the knowledge and skills shared with them. They also appeared to appreciate the fact the Rangers were intently listening to what they had to say and what they contributed to the experience.”

Robert Neish, Youth and Family Services Team