

George Watson's College: Residential Experiences and the John Muir Award

JOHN
MUIR
AWARD

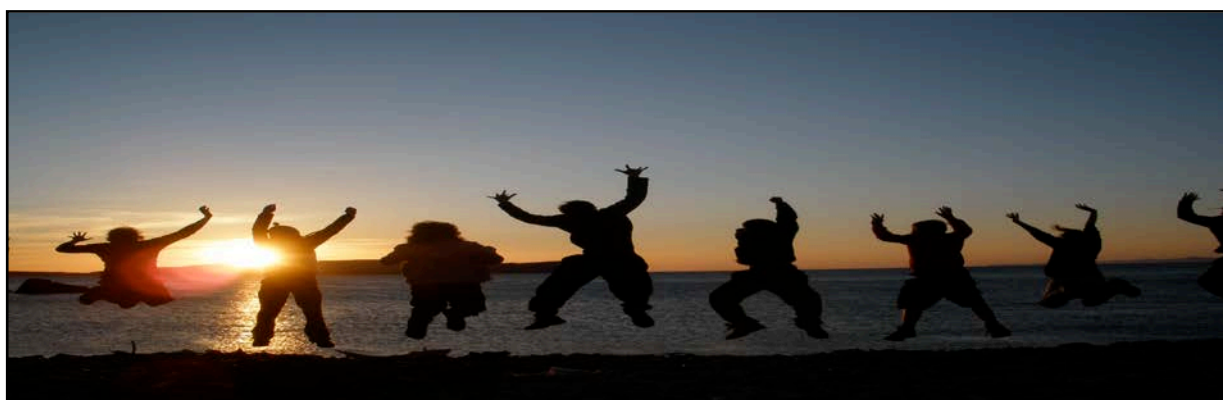
wild places:
DISCOVER
EXPLORE
CONSERVE
SHARE

There is a thirty year tradition of outdoor residential experiences for pupils in their third year at George Watson's College. Their adventures take place in all corners of Scotland, with a dozen different trips taking students from Knoydart and Skye to the Cairngorms and Orkney and from Dumfriesshire to Harris. Since 2003 the S3 Projects Programme has included the John Muir Award to reflect the longstanding care for the environment that has always been an integral aspect, and to heighten appreciation of these special locations.



"[The John Muir Award] has made me feel that there is a lot more for us to discover with the wild places around us. There are a lot more places that are so near but we have never realised them, but now they have become more inviting"

In 2009, eight Project groups participated in the John Muir Award. Between them, they spanned the very best of Scotland's wild places, from woodlands and glens to hilltops and mountain plateaus, rivers and seas to islands and moorlands. The range of residential programmes on offer is designed to give pupils the chance to spend time in the country's most remote, important and inspiring landscapes. They lend themselves to making connections with the natural environment not only through their range of activities – hiking, biking, canoeing – but also by making space for drawing, creating poetry, observing wildlife and engaging in individual moments of silence.



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Conserving and John Muir Trust Properties

The John Muir Award requires participants to spend time in a wild place (Discover) and actively Explore it. In addition there's a challenge to Conserve - to take personal responsibility and 'put something back'. Four of the groups spent time on John Muir Trust properties.

They contributed to the conservation of these places by getting involved in a wide range of practical tasks, from clearing cross drains in Glen Nevis and beach cleaning at Sandwood Bay to monitoring dwarf birch trees as a part of the Corroul Estate's Biodiversity Plan. Other groups constructed woodpile habitats on the Rothiemurchus estate and were involved in rhododendron clearance and tree planting in Torridon. Furthermore, a total of six beach clean ups were completed by the 2009 Project groups.

Alongside this practical action, the students developed an awareness of their personal impact on wild places. They practised ways to minimise this through adopting a philosophy of 'leave no trace', minimising their group wastage, recycling where possible and buying food locally. Through developing a personal appreciation for wild places during their trips, many of the students committed to taking genuine responsibility for protecting and caring for wild places.

Sutherland and Cairngorm

During the residential to Sutherland and Cairngorm, many students reflected on the impact the experience had on them (opposite).

Accompanying teacher, Paul Dean, described the effects scale and space of wild places had on the students. He commented *"They took some time adjusting to the sheer size of open space."* He went on to describe the moment when they watched a pair of golden eagles; *"they would have sat there all day watching these birds wheeling around in the air."* This experience allowed the young people to appreciate the beauty and diversity of their own country, and appeared to leave a lasting impression on many of the students. Paul commented that *"some of them came back with the experience having changed them. They think differently about conservation and the natural environment".*

"The John Muir Award made me think carefully about the world around me and how precious these wild places are"

"Now I've experienced such a wild area I can see the beauty and importance of maintaining these places throughout the world"

"[We saw] wildlife such as deer, golden eagles and caterpillar. I never thought I would see such great sights in Scotland!"

"The John Muir Award has greatly increased my awareness of wild places and how everyone has a role to play in their conservation."

Reflecting

A further element of the John Muir Award is Sharing experiences. Through journaling, and personal and group reflection whilst on their projects, the students were able to express their feelings and learning. Showing their photographs and telling stories with families and friends after the residentials, both in person and through online social networking, allowed the pupils to continue to share what they had gained through having positive experiences in wild places.

Participating in the John Muir Award and actively doing something to help conserve wild places, has supported many George Watson's pupils to develop an appreciation for the natural environment. Furthermore, the immersion into wild places that occurred during the residentials seems to have enabled the pupils to make personal connections with wild places.



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The John Muir Trust supports Learning Away's Campaign for #BrilliantResidentials, promoting the value of residential experiences for young people. Find out more at <https://learningaway.org.uk/>

To learn about the John Muir Trust's properties, including short films, visit www.johnmuirtrust.org/trust-land

