

# Case Study

JOHN  
MUIR  
AWARD

wild places:  
DISCOVER  
EXPLORE  
CONSERVE  
SHARE

## Onthank Primary School; Wild Places, Attainment & the John Muir Award

Scottish Attainment Funding partnership with the John Muir Trust and East Ayrshire's Learning Outdoor Support Team.

The partnership aims to realise the potential of learning outdoors to inspire people to take action for wild places, improve young people's health, literacy, and numeracy especially for the most disadvantaged in society. The Trust piloted a Transformative Evaluation approach to measure an ambition to assist schools in narrowing the poverty related attainment gap through participation and achievement of the [John Muir Award](#).

"I cared for it before but not as much as now. Now that you can actually see what is actually in it, it helps a lot. You want to help it so yeah; I do care a lot more after that."  
Alfie.

### Onthank Primary School

This typical urban school is situated in East Ayrshire - one of the nine challenge authorities whose schools have the highest concentrations of multiple deprivations and supported by Scottish Governments Attainment Challenge funding.

This is the story of three Primary 6 pupils Alfie, Alistair, Hayleigh, and Ms Anderson their class teacher who Discovered, Explored, Conserved, and Shared their experiences of wild places.

Behind the school is a wooded area known locally as "The Foxes" which pupils chose as their John Muir Award wild place. It is often visited by pupils after school and is in the heart of the community.

Using a [Transformative Evaluation](#) approach facilitated by John Muir Trust staff, a small cohort of participants were selected to tell their story.

[Place Based Learning](#) encourages using the local community as one of the primary resources for learning, the John Muir Award supports this alongside developing awareness and responsibility for wild places.



The feeling of wanting to protect and advocate for their wild place came through in their discussions. 100% of the class said they cared more and wanted to protect the Foxes since completing their John Muir Award.

Ms Anderson found teaching in The Foxes could be more responsive to children's interests allowing for greater flexibility and freedom to their learning. This fits in with recommendations from Professor Kenneth Muir's Education report [Putting Learners at the Centre](#) that recognises the broad attainment mix essential for building skills for life, learning and work.

The Attainment Challenge has a focus on literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing. The Foxes offered opportunity for this.

During discussions with pupils, it became clear that learning about lichen was a firm favourite, using the [Air Quality Survey](#) encouraging data handling in a real-life context.

“It has helped me with angles, as I am actually getting to see them in a real-life perspective from the branches of the tree trunks. There are different angles to show.”  
**Alistair**

Pupils recorded their thoughts and experiences through scripting and presenting a short film [Wild Places, Attainment and the John Muir Award](#). Creating their movie required teamwork and critical thinking skills.

Ms Anderson noted an improvement in some of the children’s technical vocabulary.

**Health and wellbeing** is important for quality learning experiences, much has been documented on how greenspace can support this. Our trio expressed many thoughts on how accessing and connecting with their wild place supported positive feelings of wellbeing.

“Being closer to nature, like when you connect with it, makes me feel calmer and happier, quite free.” **Alistair**

“When you are happy then you want to learn a lot more. It makes you feel more enthusiastic, it [the Award] was really good, and it helps you learn easier if you are enjoying it”. **Alfie**

### **We asked, since completing their John Muir Award, if pupils spent more time in wild places?**

“Yes, probably. Where I live there is a basketball court near me and behind there is farms. Between these there is a little strip of nature. Me and my friends just go and hang out there”

“Yes, I am a lot happier to go outside now. Before I wouldn’t have been content to just go out for a walk or a run, but now I do go out a lot more. The John Muir Award is good for helping you learn this stuff; it means you go out more”.



### **Hopes for the future**

“We need to use the land we already have because there are lots of buildings going to waste. They could get rebuilt into schools. The school should have trees in the playground because it would help a lot”.

“I would consider a job outdoors. I’d like to almost look at what is in wild places and teach others about it as it is quite interesting to learn about and it would be good to teach other people”.

“The children were more animated and engaged when participating in their John Muir Award and learning about biodiversity than they usually are in class. Certain pupils who are usually quiet or lack confidence became more involved outdoors than first expected which was lovely to see. COP 26 helped the children see the links to our learning at The Foxes to a larger global scale.” **Ms Anderson**

### **Taking action**

As the pupils’ experience of wild places grew, so did their passion to care and protect them. They planted 200 native tree whips and 50 of wildflower seed plugs as well as litter picking at The Foxes.

### **Thank you**

Thank you to Onthank Primary for allowing the John Muir Trust to work closely with the teacher and pupils to help tell their story.

A report on this [Transformative Evaluation pilot](#) is available.

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