

Adding value to adventure – the John Muir Award

“we had never really noticed – or at least openly acknowledged - the *elephant in the room*”

Nick Austin. Ullswater Outward Bound



Back in 1993 the Education Committee made a proposal to the John Muir Trust for an environmental award scheme. The basic idea was to get young people to “do something for wild places”. As Graham White, Chair of the Education Committee at the time put it: “There is a large empty green field waiting for someone to raise a standard. The John Muir Trust should seize the initiative and ask other agencies to join them in promoting nature conservation values amongst young people”. After a lot of thought, piloting and hard work, the John Muir Award was finally launched in 1997.

By 2007 nearly 50,000 people across the UK ranging from young children to pensioners had taken part in the John Muir Award. One of the reasons for this success is its simplicity, and the way that it builds so effectively on existing initiatives.

For many years, those working in formal and informal education, (and in particular in outdoor education), have taken young people out to wild places, to challenge them, to inspire them. They have done this mainly to develop self esteem, team work, and social skills in a healthy, exciting environment. There was always awareness and appreciation of the natural environment, but this was the backdrop rather than something to draw attention to. As Nick Austin of Ullswater Outward Bound says “*we had never really noticed, or openly acknowledged, the elephant standing in the background*”. One of the great catch phrases of outdoor education is to “embrace the elements”. He suggests that it is time for outdoor education, and education in its widest sense, to “embrace the elephant”. The John Muir Award, which seeks to “encourage people of all ages and backgrounds to discover, enjoy and care for the planet’s wild places” has helped them achieve this.

Nick says that the award fell on rather stony ground in the Outward Bound movement to begin with. It was seen as a distraction from the real objective of personal development. But there has been a slow realisation that the environment - nature in its widest sense – underpins everything they do, and adds layers of depth and context and interest to all their activities. The ***elephant***.

The strength of the John Muir Award – and this has been emphasised by everyone we talked to – is its simplicity and flexibility. It offers four challenges:

- Discover a wild place
- Explore it
- Do something to conserve it

- Share your experiences

How you interpret the meaning of each of the challenges is left largely to the individual or organisation – indeed this is part of the overall challenge – to come up with a proposal within this very flexible framework. There are no heavy messages or politically correct interpretations. *Think about it, enthuse us, and get on with it.*

Going solo

This is a simple technique which has been used for years in outdoor learning and group therapy:

Suggest that its time for a bit of peace. *No talking*; do your own thing. Think quietly. Or stop thinking and open up your senses to the environment – touch, smell, texture, colour, sound, shape, air, breathing. Or explore more actively: look for things, collect things, question things.

You can do it for a minute or a day.

Most people love it.

And where you do this is often remembered with intensity - it creates a sense of place.

What this means in practice is that people can add an extra layer or dimension to what they already do or would like to do. Whereas in the past, for example, Outward Bound leaders would often get their clients to “go solo” – stop talking, go off on their own, build self confidence and self reliance, think things through – the award might also encourage them to quietly explore: observe, watch, feel, smell, listen. They can be introspective, or they can be more outgoing – and connect with nature through active exploration.

This can be said of all four challenges. Vincent McWhirter, Community Education Officer with Ayrshire Council has been taking P7 kids sailing for several years. Last summer he organised trips for groups of six children from seven Schools sailing up the West Coast of Scotland, and put some of them through the John Muir Award. Whereas in previous years the trips had been exciting short expeditions for the children, mainly designed to increase self confidence and self reliance - and to help in the transition from Primary to Secondary - last year they were much more. The children learned about John Muir in class before the trip. They also researched (“discovered”) Mull, the Sound of Mull, and Ardnamurchan – its history and people, geology and wildlife. So that when they got there to explore, the place already had interest and texture.

These children were exceptionally lucky and saw a spectacular display from a group of playful dolphins in Tobermory harbour (vid clip). But the “conserve” challenge, as well as prompting a sense of responsibility throughout the trip, stimulated them to go and report the sightings to the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, thus increasing the pool of knowledge relating to these creatures. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, they were encouraged to share. Most of them kept diaries, and these contain everything from domestic life on board, through the sailing, to descriptions of dolphins and crabs. Painting and drawing was also encouraged – materials were always available, and the results speak for themselves. Indeed, so impressed was Vincent that he organised an exhibition of paintings after they returned to School, so the experience has been shared widely, and the memories and experience reinforced in every way. Needless to say, the parents were delighted, and the paintings now grace the corridors of the school - the experience has been genuinely shared. But as with so many other examples of the award, the sharing was not just about wildlife and painting. Asked what the kids had learned on the trip a group of four children said “how to share a small space with other people.” In other words this was not just a wildlife trip – it was a rich and many layered



"Day 3 Tobermory Bay 8.00am
 " We were all awake getting ready when they appeared we heard the splashes first and we quietly went up on deck to see a school of 5 dolphins. They were doing back flips and jumps around all the boats, it was fantastic, They were called Bottlenose dolphins".
Jennifer Kennedy age 11

experience. Biodiversity was simply a part of it, a thread running through it, and the John Muir Award offered a flexible structure to promote awareness without thrusting it down young peoples throats. What was the best thing about your trip? *"There wasn't a best thing. It was all good"*.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the challenge is the “conserve” element. Most people feel rather powerless to conserve, and are rarely clear about exactly what they need to conserve. Practical conservation is always

popular – planting trees, bashing rhododendrons, making paths and so on, and Ullswater Outward Bound now include this in many of their programmes. But again this can and should be interpreted flexibly. The John Muir Award encourages people to think not just in terms of conservation tasks, but also our impact on a place, and relevant local and global issues. If a group discusses what they appreciate in the environment, and whether it will still be there to appreciate in ten years – then this is itself an important contribution to conservation, and may stimulate longer term conservation ideas. And it is arguable that sharing pictures, poems - or just thoughts - will help generate awareness and respect for nature, and that in turn will lead to conservation.



According to Nick Austin, the feedback from school staff and parents has been “monumental”. “We are now doing what they always thought we should be doing”. It has also changed the pace and dynamic of some of the Outward Bound courses. There is more personal exchange of ideas. Some of the staff are genuinely passionate, and keen to communicate their enthusiasm for, and experience of, adventure and

“For me it was amazing as well. I had been to remote places in Norway previously, but it was just different, a country you’d been born in, and you didn’t know what was there”

“We all just got on which was really surprising – especially because we were such a peculiar bunch of people”.

“I saw a totally different side to our teachers, they were not like teachers at all, like people, friends”.

“There was so much more out there different from what you thought it would be like”

S4 pupils from George Watson’s College

wild places. The John Muir Award offers them a framework – a kind of facilitation – that helps them engage. And for the children the stimulation comes from the counterpoint between the exciting, big immediate experiences (white-water canoeing, climbing) and the quiet reflection, thinking through connections and values, developing a sense of place which can be so stimulating. And this is especially the case for 14 year olds at a time when they are finding themselves and their place in the wider scheme of things.

George Watson’s College in Edinburgh has been taking its entire S3 intake into wild places for the last 40 years. This has been driven largely by staff with a passion and enthusiasm for the outdoors, for hill walking, and a recognition that these activities are powerful tools for personal and social skill development at a critical age.

You might ask what could possibly persuade a teacher to spend a fortnight with a group of 14 year olds. David Pyper, head of Geography puts it like this: “It gets you out of the school context, it strips away the roles people have. You get tremendous encouragement from each other, which is very motivating for the staff. There’s a buzz, and it’s happening because we brought them here”.

It’s clear from talking to both the teachers and pupils that this is a very potent personal and social experience, coupled with a sense of wonder that these wild places still exist – close to home. And the education, or

awareness raising is embedded in this experience: there is relatively little formal education. Rather, it arises naturally from sharing observation, knowledge, opinion. David Pyper thinks this happens uniquely in an outdoor environment – when you stop for a break, the type of discussion you have, the humour, the team work. They do use some more formal materials, and link with class work to some degree. Some of the pupils studied the wildlife on and around Rum before they went there, and their observations tied in well with class work on ecosystems. But the material and the way it is used must depend on the group chemistry, dynamic and interests. A bit of structure is fine, but it needs to leave space for what is out there and who is in the group.

And this again seems to be the strength of the



John Muir Award. David Pyper realised very quickly that the award fitted very neatly with what they already did.....but it allowed them to give that extra emphasis - on the nature of the place, on why these places are important, and on conservation: giving something back. The four award themes (discover, explore, conserve and share) also gave them a simple structure for the fortnight. Everyone knew - roughly - what it was all about.

“And the sharing part is fabulous – enthusing about where you have been with friends and family”.

David Pyper, Head of Geography, George Watson’s College, Edinburgh

If you have a fortnight away with 14 year olds you clearly need some structure, but you also need time out. David Pyper: *“There is always scope to shift the balance more toward the pupils – give them time to reflect on what they are doing – and sometimes you need structures to create time to reflect. And you end up with a tremendous variety of impressions from any group”.*

Did they see much wildlife? They saw a wild cat, seals, river and marine life, a huge hairy (slightly scary) caterpillar, a deer a few feet away. And they saw all that not on a screen at home but in their natural habitat. They saw it and enjoyed it and discussed it with their friends and teachers. They also learned about the history of the place. They wrote about it in their log books. They told their friends and family about it when they got back.

And what did they do in practice for conservation? They cleared tin cans, chocolate wrappers and banana skins from the summit of Ben Nevis, and cleared nets and plastic bottles from the beaches on Handa Island. This may seem limited to some, but that is to miss the point. They did something practical and useful – they did what they could - and this is bound to reinforce a sense of responsibility and ownership, and of how we can all reduce our impact on the environment.

It’s clear from these examples (and there are many more) that the John Muir Award is highly regarded by



Tricks of the trade

Here are some techniques used in outdoor learning to get kids engaged in nature/environment

- Solo (see above)
- Points competitions for:
 - identifying rocks, plants
 - Rubbish collection
- Artwork and sculpture with natural materials, litter
- Poems
- Sound maps
- Blindfold – to enhance touch and smell
- View interpretation (what is it? What is it used for? Is it valuable or important?)
- Draw it, describe it, invent a name for it

those who have been involved. Its strength lies in its simplicity and flexibility, and in the recognition that if you get a bunch of people out into the natural environment they will respond and learn. All you need is a broad framework, and a few triggers to stimulate thought and creativity and communication.

For people like Rob Bushby and Alan Smith of John Muir Award – both from Outward Bound and adventure backgrounds - their current work is a synthesis – bringing all their passion and experience together. Personal development, physical adventure, spiritual growth, environmental awareness and practical action – all ideas that would have been familiar to John Muir himself. It seems to work well. And perhaps the John Muir Award team should get an award for their tremendous achievement in getting so many people closer to nature.

[Link: video clip of Muirhead School pupils](#)

[Link: video of sailing trip](#)

[Link: JMT video?](#)

[Link to a gallery of pictures and diary quotes?](#)