

About the John Muir Award

Over two thirds of children today cannot recognise wildlife such as a robin or blackbird and almost that number have never built a den. Shocking statistics. As professionals in the field of outdoor learning we all believe in the benefits of being outdoors, so what can we do to change these statistics for both the current and future generations?

The statistics mentioned come from a 2012 Npower survey conducted on children aged 5 to 13 years. These are the top results:

Top ten things children aged 5 to 13 **can** do:

1. Work a DVD player 67%
2. Log onto the internet 58%
3. Play computer games on games console (Wii, Xbox or similar) 50%
4. Make a phone call 46%
5. Use a handheld games console (Nintendo DSi, PSP or similar) 45%
6. Use an iPhone (or smartphone) 42%
7. Work Sky Plus 41%
8. Send a text message 38%
9. Search for clips on YouTube 37%
10. Use an iPad (or tablet computer) 31%

Top ten things children aged 5 to 13 **can't** do:

1. Recognise three types of butterfly 91%
2. Repair a puncture 87%
3. Tie a reef knot 83%
4. Read a map 81%
5. Build a camp fire 78% / Put up a tent 78.5%
6. Spot a blackbird, sparrow or robin 71%
7. Make papier mâché 72%
8. Make a cup of tea 65%
9. Build a den 63%
10. Climb a tree 59%

There are many activities, schemes and awards which do help to address some of the issues raised here. I spoke to Janet Raby, a teacher and Forest school practitioner at Totnes St John's C of E Primary School, Totnes about one scheme she had used to try and redress the balance a little.

The school chose to incorporate the John Muir Award into school life. She says *"I found out about the John Muir Award from Heatree Activity Centre where the younger children go for their residential. I decided to investigate what the Award could offer the students"*

This is an educational initiative from the John Muir Trust, which helps to build a lifelong interest in and therefore love of nature in all its complexity.

(John Muir was born in the 19th century in Dunbar, Scotland. He developed a deep love for the natural world as a child and emigrated to America with his family aged 11. He subsequently became known as the "founding father" of the world conservation movement and helped set up the first National Park.)

The John Muir Award is an environmental award, focusing on wild places. It encourages participants to enjoy the outdoors, find and explore wild places and do something to help conserve them. It's about fun

By Ruth Flynn



and adventure, it isn't competitive and every person that completes the award is sent a certificate. In 2013 over 25,000 people completed a John Muir award.

In order to complete the Award each participant must complete four challenges, to discover, explore, conserve and share a wild place. The wild place can be anywhere, not just a mountain or lake, but a back garden, school grounds, local woods etc. The exploration will help to find out more about it and its natural inhabitants, flora and fauna. Taking positive action to look after the wild space and then letting others know about your experience and achievements completes the scheme.

There are multiple levels of the award. Starting with the Discovery Level Award, which takes a minimum of four days (or equivalent) to complete, then the Explorer and Conserver Levels require participants to take greater ownership and responsibility for their plans and activities, as well as increased time commitment of Award taking at least eight days and finally the Conserver Award taking 20 days (over six months) or more respectively.

The school chose to complete the Discovery Award with their entire Year 6 class. St John's was built on what was a farmer's grazing land. As a result they have grounds that include some woodland, some grass areas and a stream. They already have an active Forest School and each year group has a half term of Forest School every academic year.

The school found that the Discovery Award could offer lots of benefits to the students and school including to heighten the awareness of conservation of the grounds, excitement for the children, a focus and progression for the year six students from their existing Forest School provision, good PR for outdoor learning and an opportunity for the school and students to have outside accreditation. Not to mention a new challenge for the teachers.

The head teacher was very supportive and the Year 6 children embraced the award wholeheartedly. The children were already committed to the outdoor space as a result of their Forest School experiences and liked the idea of having an award to take through life that they could progress in a similar way to the Duke of Edinburgh award, in the area of conservation.



Janet, their class teacher and forest school practitioner, told me *"The main aims for the children are encompassed by PHSME. In particular to encourage a personal responsibility for conservation and also to address self esteem issues as the SATs and secondary school loom ever closer."*

Janet put together a proposal which, after much conversation, was jointly agreed with the John Muir Trust. Many refinements were approved. The school Totnes St John's dedicated the best part of one intensive week to achieving the Award; other schools take a full term or year to complete and use the Award to provide a context for teaching the curriculum outside the classroom, particularly subjects such as Geography, English, Maths, Science and Art. They had agreed to suspend the curriculum for a week, with the exception of Maths which was fitted in to the start of each day.

A group of trainee teachers from Plymouth University were volunteered to assist with the project in February 2013. The children were split into small groups for their exploration and conservation projects and each group chose from a selection of activities prepared by Janet and the school staff.

The children had a fantastic time the whole week. Exploring the area took the form of various games and challenges such as; worm charming, scavenger hunts, environmental art and wide ranging games of hide and seek. The conservation projects included; clearing ponds to encourage wildlife, pruning overgrowth, making wooden walkways safe, creating bird boxes, and improving pathways. Each day the children recorded their thoughts and activities in their John Muir workbook.

" Learning about the environment and the grounds that we have has made me think about the world we live in and how we should conserve it."

Recommended reading: John Muir: My life with Nature (Joseph Cornell)

If you would like to find out more about the John Muir Award please contact the John Muir Trust at: <http://www.jmt.org/jmaward-home.asp> or for information about their training courses <http://www.jmt.org/>



About the Author

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Photographs from the author



When I asked Janet what she felt the children got out of the experience there was a list; pride, a sense of achievement, making a difference to the grounds, a feeling of being connected to the grounds forever as a result of their efforts.

Some of the children's responses:

Olivia: *"It was a great week, because while we were working together to tidy up and improve our school grounds we also had loads of fun. Who said children can't multitask?"*

Finlay: *"The week was awesome and it was such a great way to help our nature area."*

Corey: *"I really enjoyed fixing the seating area, that was my group's job"*

Owen: *"John Muir week will stay in my memory for the rest of my life. I had a really great time with my friends."*

Honor: *"Learning about the environment and the grounds that we have has made me think about the world we live in and how we should conserve it."*

On completion of the award the co-ordinator submits a synopsis of the award and a request for certificates to the John Muir Trust. To top this off Janet was able to arrange for Jonathan Dimbleby to come to the school and present the children with their certificates (photo above of the presentation). ■