

## Closing the Gap: how the John Muir Award helps raise attainment in Scotland

After the completion of this report the UK faced the uncertainty of COVID-19. Download [John Muir Award and Education Recovery \(June 2020\)](#) to see a summary on how the John Muir Trust's engagement initiative supports restarting schools, equity in education and helps raise attainment.

Since 2015, the John Muir Trust has encouraged, supported, monitored and researched how different learning establishments across Scotland use the John Muir Award to support equity in education and raise attainment.

We've found:

- 73% of schools, youth and family services agreed that the John Muir Award helps raise attainment
- 87% agreed that participation in the Award helps learners to be more active
- 81% of Providers identified that the John Muir Award has helped people they work with be healthy
- 82% of East Ayrshire pupils sampled said they enjoyed or greatly enjoyed working towards their John Muir Award
- 90% of class teachers in East Ayrshire believe their confidence in Outdoor Learning has grown since beginning their John Muir Award

The reach of the John Muir Award within schools, during the 2018/19 academic year:

- 19,430 Awards were achieved by pupils and staff (10% increase on previous year)
- 22% achieved by pupils facing barriers to learning
- We worked with 519 schools across all 32 local authorities

### Summary

The John Muir Award as an outdoor learning intervention strategy to raise attainment and achieve equity in education is:

- Popular with teachers, youth workers and pupils
- Flexible in a range of learning settings across Scotland
- Rooted in literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing
- Embedding Learning for Sustainability

Schools use the Award to help progress learning in their grounds, local greenspaces, with community partners, through residential programmes, and visits to protected areas such as National Parks.

*"I feel happier when I am outside and less depressed and bored. It is also makes me calmer and stops me from being angry."* East Ayrshire pupil

Wildness is all around us. The John Muir Trust aims to encourage people to connect with, enjoy and care for wild places, so that they are valued as significantly contributing to our daily lives.

Use the following report to find out more, including how the John Muir Award helps deliver Education Scotland's *Approaches to closing the equity gap*.

## Contents

<a href="#">Context in Scotland</a>	<a href="#">Page 2</a>
<a href="#">Attainment, outdoor learning and the John Muir Award</a>	<a href="#">Page 2</a>
<a href="#">East Ayrshire Council Partnership</a>	<a href="#">Page 3</a>
<a href="#">Approaches to closing the equity gap</a>	<a href="#">Page 4</a>

## Context in Scotland

The vision of Scottish education is to ensure equity and close the poverty-related attainment gap, ensuring children and young people acquire a broad range of skills and capacities at the highest levels, whilst also enabling every learner to thrive and have the best opportunity to succeed, regardless of their social circumstances or additional needs.

It is well recognised that contact with nature improves children’s wellbeing, motivation and confidence.<sup>1</sup> The John Muir Trust supports educators and other organisations to take learning outdoors and develop participant’s connection with the natural world through the John Muir Award, which is recognised as part of a rich menu of interventions used to raise attainment and celebrate the achievement of young people beyond the National Qualifications framework.<sup>2</sup> This document summarises how the Award supports *Approaches to closing the equity gap* as identified by the Scottish Government<sup>3</sup>, drawing on experiences from work across Scotland’s 32 Local Authorities as well as its dedicated partnership in East Ayrshire to embed the John Muir Award as an intervention to raise attainment.

*“I am very pleased to see this growth in pupils working to achieve a John Muir Award in schools. Its popularity, especially with pupils living in deprived areas, indicates that the Award is aiding improvements in literacy, numeracy, physical and mental health. Through Learning for Sustainability pupils have an entitlement that includes outdoor learning and daily contact with nature. It is therefore reassuring to hear that outdoor learning is increasingly embedded within our schools, helping children and young people stay connected with the natural world.”* Cabinet Secretary for Education John Swinney<sup>4</sup>

## Attainment, outdoor learning and the John Muir Award

Outdoor learning is an essential approach to teaching and an entitlement for children within Learning for Sustainability. Its impact on raising attainment and narrowing the poverty-related gap is increasingly evidenced. Studies show that regular contact with nature can deliver profound and diverse benefits including improving children’s wellbeing, motivation and confidence; enhancing relationships with peers and teachers; and positive impacts on academic learning and performance.<sup>5</sup> The effect of the outdoor setting on underachieving pupils is notable, improving engagement, contributions and self-confidence to match that of their peers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Outdoor Learning: Outdoor Learning Research [www.outdoor-learning-research.org](http://www.outdoor-learning-research.org)

<sup>2</sup> John Muir Award Scotland Provider Survey 2015 [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

<sup>3</sup> National Improvement Hub 2018 <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/self-evaluation/approaches-to-closing-the-equity-gap>

<sup>4</sup> Scottish [Education Secretary welcomes growth in outdoor learning](#) 2017 [www.johnmuirtrust.org](http://www.johnmuirtrust.org)

<sup>5</sup> Wildlife Trust’s Nature Nurtures Children Report, November 2019 [www.wildlifetrusts.org/news/new-report-nature-nurtures-children](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/news/new-report-nature-nurtures-children)

<sup>6</sup> Outdoor Learning: Closing the attainment gap in primary school children in Scotland Jamie Hamilton 2018 [www.forestresearch.gov.uk](http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk)

The [John Muir Award](#) is the John Muir Trust's main engagement initiative, encouraging people of all backgrounds to connect with, enjoy, and care for wild places. In the education sector, the Award's framework supports teachers to deliver the curriculum and encourages pupils to be creative, engaged and enthusiastic about their learning. Pupils disengaged from learning often respond positively to making a difference in their local community and gain a real sense of achievement upon completion. This in turn raises aspirations of pupils and teachers. Find out more about how the Award is delivered in Scottish education settings in [John Muir Award and the Curriculum for Excellence](#) and by visiting at [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org).

## Partnership in focus



In East Ayrshire, the Council's Learning Outdoors Support Team is using the John Muir Award to support equity in education. Since 2017, a Scottish Attainment Challenge funded partnership has enabled the John Muir Trust to employ an Attainment Project Officer to support staff in embedding the Award in schools.

This collaborative approach involves the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and The Conservation Volunteers, as well as the Curriculum Outdoors Attainment Challenge (COACH) programme which engages all East Ayrshire schools in quality outdoor learning\*.

Since 2017, the partnership has demonstrated an impressive level of impact to teaching and learning:

- Over 2,500 pupils through 80% of the schools have achieved their John Muir Award (300% increase since the partnership started)
- 37% of John Muir Award recipients were children with postcodes from the highest areas of multiple deprivation
- Research with pupils 'insecure of their worth' at school shows that achieving a John Muir Award improves social emotional wellbeing crucial to learning\*\*

*"This partnership facilitates agencies working together to meet the needs of staff and pupils in East Ayrshire to achieve equity in educational outcomes and giving the opportunities for everyone to be the best they can be."* Willie White, Education Officer, East Ayrshire

The partnership aims to develop capacity for teaching staff to deliver the John Muir Award as part of their everyday practice. Support is given to maximise literacy and numeracy opportunities through stimulating and novel contexts, as well as developing skills through real life learning. Partnership targets are set to ensure the narrowing of the poverty-related attainment gap.

The John Muir Trust's experience in East Ayrshire continues to demonstrate that the John Muir Award is relevant and beneficial to educational establishments.

\* Education Scotland [Curriculum Outdoor Attainment Challenge case study](#)

\*\* John Muir Trust [Using nature for nurture](#)

## Approaches to closing the equity gap

Education Scotland has identified 12 '[Approaches to closing the equity gap](#)', a series of priorities to help education practitioners raise attainment of children from the most deprived areas. Below, we focus on the eight approaches where the John Muir Award can add the most value.

### 1. Providing high quality learning and teaching

Evidence highlights that securing pupils' interest and engagement with learning through outdoor approaches has a considerable role in raising attainment. Educators report that they are reinvigorated and children are motivated when learning outdoors<sup>7</sup>; and enjoyment is recognised as a foundation of learning<sup>8</sup> that helps pupils actively engage in their education. In East Ayrshire, pupil surveys showed that 82% of learners (sampled) said they enjoyed or greatly enjoyed working towards their John Muir Award.



Figure 1: The pathway to raised attainment through outdoor learning, Natural Connections Demonstration Project

Teachers welcome the flexibility of the Award's framework, delivering learning opportunities that are meaningful, relevant and tailored to suit local contexts and pupil interests. A John Muir Award is a clear objective to work towards, a recognised outcome, and participants enjoy leading their own learning through planning and co-designing their Award. The Award's structure allows for getting creative and explicitly includes a practical activity to care for wild places, enabling pupils to see first-hand the difference they have made. This helps build awareness and motivation through taking part in something bigger and can complement classroom work, as seen at [Cadder Primary school](#) where using the Award to engage pupils over a year led to a clear improvement in academic performance.

*"I love being outdoors learning as it is so much more fun. I can't cope with classrooms all the time. The outside gives me time and space to think."* Participant, Burnbrae Primary School Youth Group, Midlothian

### 2. Providing focus and support targeted to learning needs

*"Outside we have taken away some boundaries, perceptions of what learning looks like and it allows children to think they can do things as well ... Anyone can be good at learning outdoors. So straight away we have removed hidden boundaries to engaging in this learning opportunity. It becomes*

<sup>7</sup> Curriculum Outdoors Attainment Challenge (COACH) – Literacy & Numeracy <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/>

<sup>8</sup> Natural Connections Demonstration Project 2012-16 <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6636651036540928>

*something they are more engaged in – something that they can do.*” Natalie White, COACH Project, East Ayrshire

Identifying and addressing barriers to engagement and learning contributes to improving the life chances of the most vulnerable learners. The John Muir Award is designed to be inclusive, non-competitive and accessible. Every year at least 25% of John Muir Awards in Scotland are achieved by people experiencing some form of disadvantage.

Schools use the Award in a variety of settings to help progress learning: in their grounds; local greenspaces; through community partners; via residential programmes; and through visits to protected areas such as National Parks.

Participation in the Award is free to enable equity, ensuring that social circumstances aren't a barrier to experiencing wild places. Through the Award's Four Challenges framework, activities can be tailored to suit individual learning needs, allowing everyone (who can meet the criteria) the opportunity to participate and succeed. See [Inclusion, wild places and the John Muir Award](#) for more on how the Award is used to widen opportunities and improve individual and family outcomes.

The Award is used to support disadvantaged young people through Nurture, to aid cognitive, social, and emotional development. An East Ayrshire John Muir Award Nurture group used The Boxall Profile<sup>9</sup> to track the progress of cognitive development and behavioural traits of pupils through their education, with reductions seen in the avoidance or rejection of attachment; negativity towards self; inappropriate student behaviour; and negativity towards others.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. Strategies to improve attainment in literacy and numeracy**

*“I've been delighted by the pupil's responses to an outdoor learning environment and feel that their writing and focus in English has improved as a result of engaging with nature.”* Lorna Swinney, Larbert High School, Falkirk

Learners' literacy and numeracy skills enable access to all other learning, achievement and employment, and are a central feature of school priorities for raising attainment. Teaching staff in East Ayrshire have reported improvements in children's vocabulary and writing attainment through their outdoor learning activities.<sup>7</sup>

Working towards a John Muir Award can act as a motivator for pupils to engage with literacy and numeracy activities, and offers offering real-world learning opportunities that are particularly valuable for those who struggle in classroom settings. Wild places provide rich, multi-sensory experiences that can be a catalyst for imagination, stories, curiosity, creative writing and art. Learner involvement throughout planning, undertaking and reflecting on their Award encourages listening, vocabulary and verbal skills development, while giving educators and pupils flexibility to choose how to share achievements. Storytelling, journals, drama, song, dance, presentations, assemblies, guided tours, displays and digital sharing can all feature, supported by resources from the John Muir Trust. Many students get involved in campaigning, creating opportunities for persuasive writing, local

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<sup>9</sup> The Boxall Profile [www.nurtureuk.org/introducing-nurture/boxall-profile](http://www.nurtureuk.org/introducing-nurture/boxall-profile)

<sup>10</sup> Using Nature for Nurture case study [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

community engagement and fundraising, whilst developing confidence as active, responsible citizens.

Read more about the John Muir Trust's work promoting literacy and nature through [The Lost Words collaboration](#) and support for [outdoor learning, science and literacy in Highland schools](#), including a suite of resources for educators.

The outdoors also provides opportunities for improving numeracy in real life contexts, from exploring shapes and patterns in nature to measuring, mapping and categorising. 1 in 4 John Muir Award participants take part in Citizen Science, collecting valuable data on a range of flora, fauna and environmental factors, improving data handling and analysis, and linking with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths).<sup>11</sup>

*"Speech and language, talking and listening skills are really poor, and are identified as the biggest barrier to education in these areas. I think that has come on. It's the outdoor context where you take those constraints away from them. It's not as formal. Pupils are keener to talk to peers, ask and answer questions. We have definitely seen improvement in literacy and numeracy."* Denise MacColl, Logan Primary School, East Ayrshire

#### **4. Promoting social and emotional wellbeing**

*"I feel calm, free and not enclosed."* Pupil, Linnvale Primary School, West Dunbartonshire

*"Outdoors I feel fresher, more alert and less stressed."* Carolyn McFarlane, East Ayrshire Primary Teacher

Outdoor learning and connecting with nature have wide-reaching and positive outcomes for pupils and teachers, including enhanced health and wellbeing which are seen as the foundations to successful learning<sup>8 12</sup>. Spending time enjoying, immersed in and tuning into nature gives Award participants opportunities to develop a sense of place and belonging – important aspects for building self-esteem. Benefitting from the calmness, relaxation, freedom and quietness of nature can provide a welcome respite in young people's often hectic and pressured lives, and contributing to good mental health.

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<sup>11</sup> John Muir Award Year of Young People 2018 Conserve Audit [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

<sup>12</sup> Natural England <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/category/127020>

Each Award participant gives back to nature, doing something to care for wild places – these opportunities to take personal responsibility are shown to improve personal wellbeing and nature connectedness,<sup>13 14</sup> and are associated with pro-environmental behaviours. Learners also gain a ‘feel good’ factor through seeing practical tasks completed and taking pride in the positive contributions they have made on a local and global scale. Through the Award’s Share Challenge, there is an explicit ask to review Award experiences, providing opportunities for reflection on how far individuals have come in terms of their own personal and social development.

[Anderson High School](#) have mapped their John Muir Award activity against the Scottish Government SHANARRI wellbeing indicators, demonstrating how their outdoor learning approach is key to helping improve health and wellbeing outcomes. A [wellbeing survey](#) of S1 pupils involved in the Award at Clydebank High School demonstrates the positive impacts recognised by the students themselves.



*“I feel happy and all the stresses and anger I am feeling have gone, being in the wild place makes me feel relaxed and happy.”* Pupil, Beeslack Community High School, Midlothian

### 5. Promoting healthy lifestyles and tackling health inequalities

*“It’s better than PE because you’re exercising by walking around but you don’t realise it because you’re busy doing other things”.* Pupil, St Maurice’s High School, North Lanarkshire

Increasing levels of physical activity is important in tackling health inequalities, as those living in deprived communities are more likely to experience health problems in later life, and are also less likely to experience wild places.<sup>15</sup> Spending time visiting, exploring and caring for nature through a John Muir Award can help learners get active through increasing participation in physical activities, giving individuals first-hand experience of the health and wellbeing benefits that natural environments can offer. Practical conservation tasks, walking, cycling, adventurous activity and undertaking wildlife surveys are just a few examples of how participants are encouraged to move more as part of an Award; while spending time in school gardens or local allotments – learning to grow, cook and enjoy their own vegetables - can contribute to developing healthy lifestyles through exploring sustainability, food and healthy eating.

In a survey of organisations delivering the John Muir Award (see p.2 for headline results),<sup>2</sup> many respondents observed that increases in physical activity had been sustained after completion of the John Muir Award, highlighting the role that regular, outdoor activities can play in supporting individuals to develop new habits.

<sup>13</sup> Five Ways to Wellbeing [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

<sup>14</sup> University of Derby Five Pathways to Nature Connection [blog.derby.ac.uk/2018/12/pathways-closer-connection-nature/](http://blog.derby.ac.uk/2018/12/pathways-closer-connection-nature/)

<sup>15</sup> The Health Impacts of the John Muir Award [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

*“The work in the Angus Glens was very physical. Not only did they have to hill-walk to reach their destination, they then had the physical input of the day’s work and they were out in the fresh air. This was a ‘first’ for some of these pupils who often refuse to do PE in school.”* Award Provider survey respondent

## **6. Employability skills and positive and sustained destinations**

Integration of the John Muir Award through formal and informal learning gives real world experiences of developing transferable skills,<sup>16</sup> including problem solving, leadership, teamwork and communication. These are attributes that major employers value and which can be referenced in many ways - including pupil profiling, personal statements, job/college applications and interviews - helping people towards positive destinations and employment.<sup>17</sup>

The Award can contribute to youth work approaches,<sup>18</sup> helping young people to unlock their potential, develop their voice and build their aspirations. A progressive structure of three Award levels helps maintain and develop involvement, providing increasing challenge and opportunities to build on prior learning, supporting young people’s learning pathways.

The Award also gives learners the chance to experience success – for the first time for many – and to see how they are making a positive difference.<sup>2</sup> Each successful participant gains a nationally recognised certificate, which can help to track progress and move people towards positive destinations,<sup>19</sup> with opportunity to add value by delivering in conjunction with other youth awards.

*“The John Muir Award has been an invaluable experience for our pupils. For many of our young people ... it gave them the chance to attain an award and give them a sense of achievement ... For the majority they have never left their local community; through exploring wild spaces they have been able to broaden their horizons.”* Melissa Muir, Trinity High School, Renfrewshire

## **7. Developing professional learning and leadership at all levels**

For educators, planning and delivering a John Muir Award can bring opportunities for professional learning, building confidence in teaching outdoors and sharing good practice with others.<sup>20</sup> Participation is supported by a range of freely -available resources, advice and information from the John Muir Trust. Completing [training](#) is not a pre-requisite but courses are available to support those looking to explore the Award and connections to key themes – such as literacy and nature – in greater depth. Teachers have used the Award as a pathway to gaining Professional Recognition in Outdoor Learning,<sup>21</sup> whilst others have used it as a tool to embrace Learning for Sustainability.<sup>22</sup> Teachers can take on an Award in a way they find works best for the needs of each individual group. In East Ayrshire it has been embedded using a strategy of ‘Team Teaching’ to guard against the expectation that experts are required to deliver the Award. 90% of class teachers in East Ayrshire believe their confidence in outdoor learning has grown since beginning their John Muir Award.

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<sup>16</sup> Youth Work, Nature and the John Muir Award [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

<sup>17</sup> School Education Audit Scotland (June 2014) [www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk)

<sup>18</sup> The Link Autumn 2019 [www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/3893/the-link-autumn-2019-aw-lr.pdf](http://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/3893/the-link-autumn-2019-aw-lr.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Amazing Things [www.youthscotland.org.uk/resources/amazing-things-4th-edition/](http://www.youthscotland.org.uk/resources/amazing-things-4th-edition/)

<sup>20</sup> John Muir Award and Professional Development for Teachers in Scotland [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

<sup>21</sup> Professional Recognition in Outdoor Learning and the John Muir Award [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

<sup>22</sup> Teacher Education and the John Muir Award [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)



*“I was initially hesitant to take on responsibility for delivering the John Muir Award as it is often easy to make excuses not to take learning outside. However, I bit the bullet and I never looked back. The enjoyment, knowledge and skills the children are gaining from the experience is fantastic and hopefully this will build a lasting legacy of a love for the natural world.”* Marc Andrew, St Andrew’s Primary School, Falkirk

## **8. Engaging families and communities**

Working towards a John Muir Award offers schools varied opportunities to engage with families and local communities. The Award helps link learning at school and home, reinforcing positive outcomes. Through the COACH programme in East Ayrshire, parents stated that the children were more motivated to talk at home about their daily activities and share their outdoor learning experiences. Sharing experiences is a key part of each Award, giving opportunities to directly involve parents and carers in actively celebrating in pupils’ achievements and learning.

Alongside the individual Award, the Family John Muir Award offers a way to improve parental engagement. Working towards a shared goal, improving parent-child relationships, boosting confidence and simply enjoying spending time together outdoors all create opportunities for positive, active, shared experiences in healthy environments and can foster positive attitudes to lifelong learning. Through the Golfhill Primary School Families in Partnership programme in Glasgow, use of the Award helped improve parental engagement with their children’s learning, whilst building stronger relationships between teaching staff and parents through fun, informal outdoor activities.<sup>23</sup>

Visiting local wild places gives schools opportunities to strengthen links with communities, through introducing students to the environments on their doorsteps and developing partnerships with community organisations. Through an Award, young people gain confidence in accessing greenspaces that can be returned to with parents/carers, helping foster a sense of connection to their local neighbourhood and allowing the whole family to gain benefits of spending increased time in nature.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Golfhill Primary Family Award [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

<sup>24</sup> With Kids Family Award [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

## Partnership in focus



Dundee Learning in Nature project: A dedicated partnership project in Dundee has helped make a difference to children in Scotland's most deprived areas. Funding was secured from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to engage 1,340 pupils, from six local schools, in activities such as greenspace improvements and participating in the John Muir Award.

This funding has enabled the Trust to work with Dundee-based organisations (The Arts and Communities Association and Rock Solid community project) to target and support communities where poverty is a barrier to learning.

The project has supported teachers to provide young people with positive nature learning opportunities and engagement with outdoor creative activities. It aims to build pupil skills and confidence as well as encouraging young people to reflect on important issues of environmental protection and conservation.

As part of the project the John Muir Trust has delivered Literacy & Nature and John Muir Award training for 75 practitioners across Dundee. The project will culminate in December 2020.

"So proud of my boy today being presented with his John Muir Award through Rock Solid. This has been a great experience for him, getting out of class to work on his team build skills and work on his confidence". Rock Solid participant parent

"I've liked everything about the project, doing things outdoors was really fun. It's different to other projects". Pupil, Glebelands Primary School

Find out more about [learning in local greenspace](#) & [Nature Scot Outdoor Learning in Nature fund](#)

"What we build, develop, cherish and seek, every time, is to see the subtle, soft beginning of a calmer, more connected child who might just find their own state of happiness in their time with us, who will happily develop strong friendships with their peers, and who may even go on to discover as much about themselves and the natural world as John Muir himself did." Rock Solid

Search '[Place and Play RSlovesgreenspaces](#)'

## Background and contact

The John Muir Award is an environmental award scheme focused on wild places. It encourages people of all backgrounds to connect with, enjoy, and care for our natural environment. It is the John Muir Trust's main engagement initiative.

People achieve their John Muir Award across all 32 Scottish Local Authority areas. If you would like to receive a copy of the Trust's annual John Muir Award Scotland Education Report that highlights schools Award activity across each Local Authority and find out more about supporting John Muir Award activity, then please contact us at [info@johnmuiraward.org](mailto:info@johnmuiraward.org).

## The John Muir Trust

We are a membership-based conservation charity dedicated to the protection and experience of wild places. The Trust was founded in 1983 and was inspired by the life and works of John Muir (1838-1914), the Scots-born founding father of modern conservation and the inspiration behind national parks.

[www.johnmuirtrust.org](http://www.johnmuirtrust.org)

#JohnMuirAward

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*John Muir Trust recognises and thanks our educational partners and funders:*

