

A sense of freedom

Kim McIntosh explains how the John Muir Award offers a safe haven in the outdoors for young asylum seekers and refugees to learn new skills.

A key aim of the John Muir Award, a UK wide environmental award scheme, is to ensure that social circumstances aren't a barrier to experiencing wild places. Since its pilot phase in the mid-90s, engaging with people from all backgrounds has been at the heart of the John Muir Award. Every year since then, at least 25% of Awards achieved are by people experiencing some form of disadvantage. It is something we are really proud of.

In 2014 over 4,600 Awards in Scotland were achieved by people experiencing disadvantage. Nineteen of which were achieved by a group of young asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow who participated through a partnership between Glasgow Clyde College and Forestry Commission Scotland.

The students were on a specialist English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) course for young people who are in Scotland without any family. The main aims of the course are for the students to learn English, to develop personal and social skills, improve integration and learn how to work as a team. The John





“ Young asylum seekers and refugees rarely get beyond the high rise flats or supported accommodation they live in.”

Muir Award provides meaningful and shared experiences in the outdoors to build these skills beyond the classroom setting, expanding the curriculum as much as possible. It is an opportunity for the young people to have an exposure to Scotland in a different way and to get value from these experiences.

“Young asylum seekers and refugees rarely get beyond the high rise flats or supported accommodation they live in.” explains Lyn Ma, the groups’ teacher. “They have no idea how to access the outdoors in Scotland. We want to show them what’s here and give them a chance to experience it.”

“Through the activities we do towards the Award we find out just how many things the young people can do. They are able to showcase the skills they are unable to express in the classroom and that are often masked by language barriers. We have discovered incredible botanists in the group and some with fantastic survival skills. Through sharing their abilities in navigation and shelter building, for example, the young people’s confidence grows.”



The opportunity to share their skills (sharing being a key part of the Award) is just one of the benefits the leaders see for the young people. Lyn goes on to describe some others -

- The psychological benefits of being outside are evident – a sense of freedom, appreciation and joy are experienced. The positive impacts on people’s well-being through exposure to nature are well evidenced, but Lyn recognizes just how significant this is for this group of young people who have experienced a great deal of trauma in their lives.
- Through shared experiences in the outdoors the young people have developed real togetherness. This is powerful for people who came to this country with no one. As one young person said “out here we are like family, all together, singing and laughing.”
- They can compare the environments to their home countries, the landscapes, plants, wildlife. It gives them a context for where they now live, and helps them feel connected to a place. “This is like home, in Afghanistan we have mountains too, I used to run up them with my father.”
- It gives them a chance to play, relax, and have fun, whilst feeling safe. The young people love the outdoor element to the course; it is something to look forward to. They show up every week in all weathers: voting with their feet!

The John Muir Award works for this group as it gives a framework for their activity, yet the Award’s flexibility means it can be tailored to the needs of the young people. The John Muir Award is not language based, which is particularly valued. The students can show what they can do and have learnt without having to write a paragraph. One young student surprised us all with his mastery of basket weaving and shelter building – suddenly everyone wanted him in their team.

Working towards the Award was not the motivation for the young people’s involvement, but it can be described as the pinnacle of their experience.

Tom Gold, from the Forestry Commission Scotland, explained: “The recognition of their commitment to the project and their learning, through the John Muir Award certificate, was valued by the young people. It is a tangible outcome that can be used in CVs and interviews and help them to make it in Great Britain.”

To find out more about the John Muir Award or contact their Scotland Inclusion Manager:

T: 0131 554 0114

W: www.johnmuiraward.org

E: kim@johnmuiraward.org

