

An investigation into the John Muir Award and its relationship with outdoor education and environmental education

Rob Bushby – MSc in Outdoor Education, University of Edinburgh, December 2003

Summary

Introduction

The John Muir Award was set up in response to the finding that fewer than 0.1% of 5-24 year-olds were taking up opportunities to get involved with environmental organisations and in the words of John Muir, ‘do something for wild places and wild creatures’. The original idea was to set up an award scheme to promote conservation awareness and involvement, a delivery mechanism ‘which could bring [the John Muir Trust’s] message to a wider audience’ in a way that was accessible and appealing to a wide audience, with ‘national profile and high status.’ This study explores the relationships between the key educational fields in which the John Muir Award exists, the Award itself, and the organisations that employ it, ‘Providers’. The final link in the chain of its delivery – the experiences of individuals who participate – is recommended as an area for further research.

The questions being addressed, then, are:

- what secondary sources support the structure and philosophy of the John Muir Award?
- according to the organisations using it, does the John Muir Award meet its aims?
- what is the role of the John Muir Award in relation to outdoor education and environmental education?

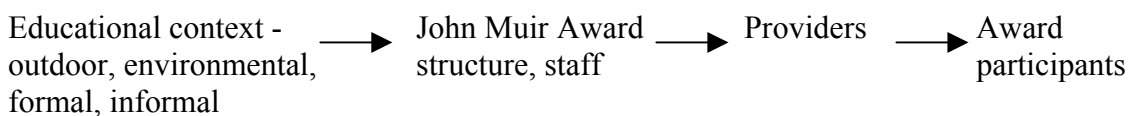
A Review of Secondary Sources

A narrative is given in the study to offer a broad literature-based perspective on the John Muir Award. This describes its rationale, underpinning philosophies and structure by referencing multiple sources. An interpretation of its operating arena is in line with Muir’s view that ‘wildness’ exists in some form everywhere - ‘wild places’ are seen as an unbroken continuum, radiating outwards from the local environment to the truly remote areas of the world. As an Award that is ‘open to all’, its relevance to a range of audiences is explored, as is its framework of Discovering, Exploring, Conserving and Sharing experiences of wild places.

In exploring the contemporary context in which the John Muir Award operates, limitations in the fields of outdoor education and environmental education became evident. These include a limited scope and definition, a focus on skills, knowledge and a human dimension, and the apparent lack of confidence that many ‘outsiders’ have in regard to these fields. There is a role for the John Muir Award in supporting collaborative approaches between outdoor education, environmental education, formal education and informal education. It also offers an experiential framework to bridge a gap between theory and practice, promoting the holistic approach implicit in ‘outdoor environmental education’.

Survey of John Muir Award Providers

Having conducted a survey of 43 organisations using the Award (Providers) in Scotland, a chain of delivery became apparent:



The results have been used to get a better understanding of our working relationships and get feedback on what the people who run and deliver the Award think of it. Main points include:

▪ **Reasons for starting to use the John Muir Award:**

Helps give structure to activities	64%	Important/very important
Certificate for individuals	67%	Important/very important
Sense of achievement	91%	Important/very important
Shared ethos & philosophy	84%	Important/very important

▪ **Has the partnership contributed toward the aims of your organisation?**

Yes, fully 40%	Largely 44%	Partly 12%	A little 5%	Not at all 0%
----------------	-------------	------------	-------------	---------------

▪ **Benefits of participation** – a wide range of comments include references to:

- PR, Smiles, Building relationships – flexible
- Inclusion & achievement for the less academic – accessible
- Involvement in our own environment – structure & focus
- Opens eyes – appreciation of Scottish scenery
- Adds value to our product
- Centres on the individual & their experience
- Certificates – kudos
- Confidence building

▪ **Meeting the aims of the John Muir Award – has your involvement:**

	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Increased awareness of wild places	83%	10%	7%	-
Encouraged people to value wild places & take responsibility	90%	5%	5%	-
Promoted educational, social & personal development	81%	12%	7%	-
Encouraged an environmental/youthwork agenda	81%	12%	7%	-
Raised awareness of John Muir	90%	10%	-	-

A key finding is that, with such low levels of disagreement, Providers indicate that the John Muir Award is meeting its aims from an organisational perspective. This is perhaps not surprising as they are already committed to it. However, agreement levels are notably high, and are allied to a significant contribution to their own aims. (Again, organisations would be unlikely to use the Award if they felt it made no contribution to their work.)

▪ **Benefits of the John Muir Award to Providers** can be identified in 4 categories:

Environmental awareness and conservation activities. It is clearly seen to be a vehicle for introducing environmental education in an informal setting; increased awareness of issues surrounding conservation is acknowledged. Its experiential nature, the hands-on conservation work, and ecology and conservation of the countryside are all identified as valued benefits. The Award appears to be a catalyst for exploring the interrelationship between people and place in some instances. It is described by respondents as something that can change the way pupils think about the world, it involves ‘excluded kids in conservation with an edge to it’. The rationale for getting young people from such backgrounds out in their local environment is articulated – ‘a lot of children don’t shine in the classroom but are totally different outside’.

Organisational benefits range from general collaborative partnership working to national accreditation and an association with the John Muir Award and its ‘kitemark’. It is recognised as being able to guide work with different age ranges.

Personal development of participants emerged as a strong theme with a range of benefits such as working in teams, self-esteem, confidence building. Sense of achievement is again prominent, along with a learning and enjoyment dimension to these experiences. Aspects of involvement and inclusion are also valued.

The nature of the John Muir Award is valued, giving a structure for promoting environmental awareness, and as a progressive incentive to maintain interest and involvement. Its achievability and accessibility are also noted as benefits.

- **Integrating the 4 Challenges of the John Muir Award – Discover, Explore, Conserve, Share**
Discovering and Exploring wild places were found to be mostly ‘ideal’ and ‘easy’ to link to programmes of activity, with slightly more difficulty experienced with fitting in a Conserve/personal responsibility theme and Sharing experiences. On the whole, 2/3 of the respondents found the Award structure ‘ideal’ and ‘easy’ to use. 2/3 found the timeframe of the Discovery Level ‘ideal’, although over half and over 3/4 don’t use the Explorer and Conserver Levels respectively.

- The main **barriers** to using the John Muir Award more effectively were: ‘time’ and the John Muir Award being ‘not a priority’. Responses to ‘Lack of support from the John Muir Award’ and ‘Poor/unclear information’ strongly indicate that these are not barriers (‘Not at all’ – 88% for both).

- 73% of organisations surveyed work with **socially excluded** groups or individuals in some way.

- Feedback on **resources** and a number of suggestions to better promote and implement the John Muir Award have been acted on. A poster has been created, a video produced and distributed, and networking events held or scheduled. Generally, resources are rated 4/5 or 5/5.

- Responses to the invitation **to offer one suggestion to improve the John Muir Award** can be summarised in terms of :

- broadening the scope, awareness and profile of the John Muir Award
- resources
- structure and management

Several comments endorse earlier findings (‘keep it as unbureaucratic as possible’; ‘no change, major role to play in environmental justice’; ‘fine as it is’) and broadly support the current ethos and aims.

- **Are you a member of the John Muir Trust? Would your organisation join the John Muir Trust if an Organisation Category was available?**

17% of the representatives questioned are currently members. 67% of respondents’ organisations would join, with 7% declining. ‘Don’t know’ responses were all cost-benefit dependent. There is obvious potential for an Organisation Membership category to be pursued by the John Muir Trust.

- **Recommendations** include evaluate individual experiences, offer support to better integrate Conserve and Share Challenges, produce video and poster, information targeted at younger audience, focused research into various specific areas, refer to specific data when redesigning new materials, clearer signposting of available resources, review of website.

Conclusion

The study concludes that organisations using the John Muir Award (in Scotland) indicate that it does largely meet its stated aims, whilst contributing to their own aims. Associated with a fledgling renaissance of holistic approaches and the emergence of the concept of ‘outdoor environmental education’, there is clear potential for the continued growth of the John Muir Award, and for it to adopt an increasingly significant role in relation to outdoor education and environmental education.