



Image credit: Joe Cornish/2020VISION

Inspired by the words of John Muir, a wife and husband team decided to embark on their John Muir Award. In their 50's, living in Fife, and experienced in the outdoors, their aim was simple spiritual renewal – 'a wilderness experience through a more reflective approach, rather than goal-driven adventure'. Plans to deliver the Award to the young people that they work with also acted as motivation to participate themselves.

A reflection on our journey to Assynt – Oct 2014
Words, Ingrid – images, Chris (mostly)

They were strange times. The Referendum [Scottish] had come and gone. There was a flatness where nothing and everything had changed. Identities had been questioned leading to a confusion of spirit. A good friend and artistic mentor had just died. We were weary and agitated and in need of space. The journey up North seemed to take longer than usual and it was well into the afternoon before we humped the boat off the roof of the car and slid it into the mud beside two small boats, partially sunken by recent rains and weeks of neglect.

The light was playfully snaking on the reeds as we slid down the short stretch of river leading to Cam Loch itself. A heron flopped above the numerous islets encrusted with willow, rowan, alder birch and lichen. As the Loch narrowed to the falls separating Loch Cam from Loch Veyatie, the rumble of the waterfall cut through the silence announcing the portage ahead. We stumbled through bog and heather carrying barrels, but the canoe itself slid easily over the heather. The light was fading.



Our first campsite was a just -about-tent-sized-not-quite-flat piece of ground nestling beneath birches. The deer maintained a steady backdrop of roaring as the first stars appeared in the sky, then in the loch. Before long the sky was alight with stars, glittering between the feathery birch branches. In the fire-pan a modest fire warmed our increasingly chilly hands. We tracked satellites across the sky, speculated about whether the constellation with the curly tail was Scorpio, shared a dram (Jura) and waited for the moon to rise. I had lit a candle on a rock for my friend, John, but in the face of such natural wonder it seemed superfluous, so I extinguished it. I swear I could hear him mumble "That's better" over my shoulder, as he had done so many times before when watching me paint!

Having stripped our lives down to the elemental: the water, the night, the fire, the cold, the stars, we found time to talk, really talk about the mixed up contents of our heads. It was an unburdening; a laying bare.

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We woke to natural light. The sun not yet risen over the hills, but the loch peachy with anticipation: faint mist rising from its surface. It was cold: the tent coated in a layer of frost; ice formed in the base of the canoe. The extinguished candle came to the rescue, warming the meths sufficiently for it to light. The day that had dawned so brightly was a day of thwarted plans. It had been our intention to climb Suilven. For a while I tried to convince myself that the small motorised craft containing passengers of the be-tweedded and camouflaged variety was not heading towards us. It was. There was stalking on Suilven that day and the next. We were asked politely (told) not to go on its slopes.

Faced with this disappointment, I learned a little about my relationship with the outdoors. In my head Suilven had taken on symbolic importance. Not to make the ascent felt like failure. My time in the outdoors was still objective-driven. I was still trying to experience nature on my terms. I also learned that when I am

angry/upset/disappointed... **I do not want to talk about it!** I think after observing my silent but determined paddling for a few minutes, my husband realised that too! The revised plan to paddle Fionn Loch involved a short river section. The shallow water demanded my concentration. The dipper bobbing on the rock restored my good humour.

At a meander just before the river opened into the loch, we stopped for lunch, and tried out a simple sensory activity that had been planned for the students whom I would be leading through the John Muir Award. We sat apart in meditative silence, recording all the sounds we could hear for 15 minutes. Perhaps it was the wind direction, but I could hear very little behind me. In fact, I could hear very little at all: A waterfall on a distant hillside: the bellowing of stags (one of whom managed to howl like a wolf!); the odd cronk of ravens; a couple of small fish jumping and landing in the river; the "seep" of a small bird; the rustling of my waterproof; my own breath. It was difficult to tear ourselves away from that kind of peace. The activity had connected us to the location. We had mapped it with sound. We decided to unpack the canoe, paddle Fionn Loch and then return to camp there that evening in the shadow of the great humped back of Suilven.

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I was starting to relax into this objective-free exploration. Lining back up the river into Loch Veyatie led us to explore an offshoot of the main loch. A haven of calm for writing journals, photographing lichens and enjoying companionable silence.

As we emerged from our reverie onto the main loch, it was apparent that the weather was also changing gear. As we were relaxing, it was gathering force. The almost flat calm water was now running in riffles, the wind was around force 3-4. The clouds were gathering. There would be no stars tonight. We made our camp and then set about trialling another activity: Nature's Rainbow. The shooting party was returning by motor-launch. I wonder what they would make of two full-grown adults sneaking through the undergrowth selecting little jewels of colour to adhere to postcards with double-sided sticky tape! The setting sun cast red strips of light across the Lewisian Gneiss hummocks that foreground Suilven. It became grey and still. Even the bellowing of the deer seemed muted here. In the firepan a damp piece of wood whistled like an oystercatcher.

The remainder of the trip was to be physically more challenging. First the reverse portage into Cam Loch, then the paddle up Cam Loch in increasing winds. Whilst theoretically it should be helpful having the wind at your back, when it is blowing Force 6, the heavily laden canoe became a bit of brute to handle as it surfed the waves. We abandoned plans to camp at the head of the loch, as we are concerned that it will be too difficult to paddle out if the winds persisted (which they did).



Flattened hollows indicated where red deer have couried down for the night amongst the alders. We make our own nest on a narrow strip of shoreline and set off to explore on foot. On a rock outcrop a grasshopper negotiates the moonscape of conglomerate, peppered with rose quartz meteors, moss and lichen. An eagle soars on the winds and perches; its head silhouetted against the sky.

It was a stiff paddle out in the morning. I took transit markers and counted 1000 paddle strokes. Progress was not inevitable. The wind was gusting Force 7. The lactic acid was building in my shoulders. We had to sneak round the shore to gain what little shelter we could; paddling hard, then finding places to rest. The wild places were reminding us of their wildness and I am glad that it is this way. As we neared the foot of the loch the wind lessened; there was less fetch here, or the wind was dropping. We landed on an island to snatch a last meal in the open before heading for the car.

We are rested, calm, changed, together as we weave back up the river to where we began. A dipper bobs on a rock to show us where to land, and as we heave barrels, dry sacks and canoe up the banking to the road, he continues to play in the river, washing himself clean.



Cleaning up

The clean-up focus of our Award consisted of another journey to a much more accessible loch on a bright November day armed with rubber gloves, workman's gloves and plastic sacks. Loch Earn is a popular camping spot, but the accumulation of human rubbish around the shore makes it a place that we seldom think to paddle.

The work was initially unpleasant, the smells, at times, gut-retchingly awful. The hygiene issues and risks of cutting

yourself on broken glass very real...and yet as we worked and could see the difference that we were making, we gained an enthusiasm for our task.

Retrieving bottles in the shallow water along the shore became almost a game. The more heavily laden the canoe with plastic sacks of rubbish, the more satisfied we became, until we had established a connection between ourselves and the landscape. We hadn't assumed ownership, but had assumed some responsibility.

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It was then that I had a bit of a revelation of something so obvious that we had failed to include it in our proposal form. We are both educators with the opportunity to share the experience of our weekends with the students we teach and subtly challenge and influence their own relationship with the environment.

We returned to Loch Earn a week later, this time in sea kayaks; mine was new to me and I wanted to get the feel of it in sheltered inland waters. Now cleared of the worst of the rubbish, Loch Earn seemed an attractive option. The connection established the previous weekend was still alive. We could appreciate what we had achieved and gained a sense of personal well-being through restoring the damaged shoreline to the wild.

We are not naïve. The rubbish will be back....and so will we. Perhaps in time, if we have enough conversations with the people we can influence, we won't need quite so many plastic sacks.

Our John Muir Award Four Challenge Review

<i>Discover a wild place</i>	Assynt and Loch Earn (Scotland), river, loch, shore, woods, stars, mountains, rock...	Canoe journey, wild camping, reflection, solo time, photography, writing, wildlife watching, tuning into senses...	<i>Explore it</i>
<i>Conserve</i>	Leave No Trace, minimum impact, litter-sweep, rights & responsibilities...	Shared reflections, sketches, photos, blog, journal, introducing John Muir Award to others...	<i>Share your experiences</i>

John Muir Award

Is an environmental award scheme focused on wild places. It helps young people, adults and families connect with nature, and enjoy and care for our natural environment.

