



**Wiltshire
Wildlife Trust:
Case Study**



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By Dean Sherwin, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Youth Participation Officer

Exploring the Plain - an Xplanation

“That is so cool” exclaimed Robert as the drake mallard landed on Brockback Lake, one of three lakes at Wiltshire Wildlife Trust’s Langford Lakes nature reserve. Robert is one of 13 young people who have achieved a John Muir Award by participating in a joint project between Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Defence Estates and the Army Welfare Service. The aim of Xplanation, a one year Heritage Lottery Fund project, is to ‘explain the Plain’ to young people living in four Wiltshire military communities by engaging them in the natural heritage of the Salisbury Plain and for them to draw inspiration and create four community spaces.

The activities occurred at a range of locations around Wiltshire and Hampshire including a visit to Stonehenge. Throughout the project the young people voluntarily walked and worked across the wilds of Salisbury Plain in pouring rain, driving hail and blazing sunshine.



Campfire marshmallows...
“This is a dream come true”

Here is just some of what they got up to... cooked over open fires; slept on a woodland floor; built their own shelters; dug turf and sowed wildflower seeds; picked apart owl pellets; dyed t-shirts with beetroot; detected bats in the dead of night; night exercises; environmental art with willow; wild food identification; visits to the Hawk Conservancy Trust and Barbury Castle hillfort Iron Age roundhouse; pond dipping; wildflower identification; bird watching; night walks; exploring the River Wylde; bushcraft; and just sitting or lying around on logs and fallen tree trunks just ‘being’.



“The John Muir Award gave us a focus. At the end of every session we created space, a few minutes, for people to reflect on what they had just done. This helped reinforce knowledge, and personalise their own experience, rather than folk just going home. These sessions quite often involved sitting on logs and simply chatting. This is how doing the Award really helped the whole programme.”

*“I never knew I liked blackberries”
...after picking some.*

Dean Sherwin (Education & School Grounds Officer)

A highlight for the young people was the natural resource based survival weekend undertaken on the Erlestoke Area 5 training area. A role play scenario entailed the young people being washed up on an island and having to survive using natural resources gathered themselves from the wild, helping gain an appreciation of how people would have once lived on Salisbury Plain. This also involved fire making; how to skin, butcher and cook a deer; how to collect and purify water from a spring; and participate in a night stalk using the landscape to avoid detection.

Local action

After being inspired by the summer activities the groups met again to discuss ideas for developing community spaces. A remarkable consensus was achieved and groups organised a Youth Community Forum. Some of the young people excelled at sharing their experiences by informing the adults present of their plans and providing enthusiastic interpretations of why they had chosen the community space features.

“It will be good to make a garden so that it won’t be boring any more”



Then the young people implemented their ideas and constructed the gardens with the help of volunteers from the civilian community coming and twenty four volunteers from 14 Regiment Royal Artillery. The grand opening of the community spaces allowed the young people to share their experiences and inspirations.



Finally, on Monday 2nd March 2009, the Armed Forces Minister, Bob Ainsworth, visited Bulford Beeches to witness the partnership and community work. Representatives from each of the four youth groups showed the Minister the skills they had learnt, as well as explaining to him their participation on Xplanation and exploring of the Salisbury Plain. The Minister presented the young people with their John Muir Award certificates.

“Simply having a relationship with the environment has really helped the team.”
Felicity Harris, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust

Outcomes

- The fact that the young people have seen the project through from inception to completion has fostered a sense of stewardship which will leave local places in much ‘better shape’ for future young people.
- The young people have travelled an immense distance in terms of behaviour, self-actualisation, attitudes to health and fitness, self-esteem and interest and participation in visiting the outdoor environment.
- One particular young person developed from an uncomfortable participant to being the creative force driving forward the ideas for the community spaces and the open days.

The journey the young people have taken following in John Muir’s footsteps, has a legacy way beyond the expectations of those who initiated the project.