



## Stephenson House, Prudhoe Hospital Case Study Summer 2011



The John Muir Award has inspired students from Stephenson House to become 'scientists' and guardians of wild places. Stephenson House is a residential unit based at Prudhoe Hospital for 14 to 18 year olds with learning disabilities and works with the Tyne Rivers Trust. Staff and students created the Stephenson House River Watch Group to improve the Stanley and Clinty burns which run through the grounds. Their John Muir Award activity is not limited to the riverbank; they have experienced and enjoyed a wide variety of habitats both in the hospital grounds and beyond, from Teesside to Gateshead.



### ***"We are all scientists"***

While exploring the hospital's extensive grounds the group discovered that the site is a biodiversity hotspot. Group leader and registered nurse, Andrew Thurm, said *"One of the most exciting times was when we found some rare and colourful waxcap fungi growing. After checking with a fungi expert, we found there were 15 different species of waxcap, which resulted in the site being classified as nationally important!"*

The young people undertook a survey of invasive plants in the local dene. They invited Dr Ceri Gibson from the Tyne Rivers Trust to help understand what they found. During the visit, Ceri encouraged them to form a River Watch Group to further improve and protect the streams flowing through the dene.

From the start, Ceri's enthusiasm and knowledge inspired the members of the newly established River Watch Group to challenge themselves and try new experiences. She told the group that *"we are all scientists"* and taught the students how to carry out chemical tests for acidity, dissolved oxygen and ammonia to assess water quality. The students also learnt to monitor temperature and identify and record invertebrates.

The group is now responsible for protecting their stretch of river through litter cleans and removal of invasive plants. One student said *"I had fun cutting the branches off the Rhododendron, and it was good to know it was such important work."* During the winter of 2010 building work nearby uncovered a large pit of buried rubbish which slid into the burn. The students cleared the debris quickly before the material could block up the river and cause long term damage to the ecosystem. Through these activities they developed personal pride in their accomplishments within the dene. A Stephenson House student said *"It's been good fun; I really enjoyed it and am proud of the work."*



## Developing at our own rate

The John Muir Award allows young people at Stephenson House to develop and learn at their own rate. Its adaptable framework of four challenges has encouraged the group to try a wide variety of new activities beyond the dene from watching Red Kites at Gibside Estate in Gateshead to creating artwork. One participant said, *"I liked finding out about the reintroduction of the Red Kites, and then seeing them in flight at Gibside."* Some of the young people learnt how to orienteer as part of their John Muir Awards and achieved their National Navigation Awards.

Taking responsibility for an area, completing important water monitoring tasks and sharing experiences has increased self esteem, improved teamwork and made the students conscious of the impact of their actions on others and on the environment around them. The John Muir Award has helped improve communication between participants ('whose turn is it to use the loppers?' is a favourite topic) and with members of the public. One student, Nigel, has become much more confident and able to speak his mind. Ceri explains, *"A dog walker passing through the burn asked what we were doing. Before any of the adults could answer, Nigel explained that they were monitoring riverflies as part of a Tyne Rivers Trust River Watch Group. He went on to explain why riverflies are so important for a healthy river. This is my favourite memory of working with this group because I could really see how much Nigel had learnt and developed socially."*

Outdoor activities have had positive health benefits for the staff and participants. Andrew said, *"Doing the John Muir Award has increased the physical activity levels of the young people, which is always a good thing! Walking up and down the dene, bending and stretching to pick up litter, and sawing logs are all good exercise; the fresh air and feeling happy were also big bonuses."*

## Global connections through John Muir

The group has taken an active approach to learning about John Muir. The unit developed a link with a ranger in Yosemite National Park which has led to a global sharing experience. The students share what they are achieving for the John Muir Award with the ranger and he sends photos and stories about Yosemite, giant sequoias and John Muir's legacy in America. The hospital has a redwood on site and it has become tradition to stop and feel the spongy bark on the way back from the dene!



## Moving forward

2011 is an exciting time for Stephenson House. Young people are now progressing through all three levels of the John Muir Award and the hospital is moving sites. The students are planning to continue with the River Watch Group and they planted a tree nursery at the new site.