

# Women in the wild

**Coralie Hopwood** considers the need to celebrate female role models in the outdoors

**I HAVE** always felt more comfortable outdoors. My earliest memories are entwined with smells, sounds and the physical experiences of getting stuck in trees, hiking and grumbling up mountains, and playing in woodlands along the coast where I grew up. It was apt then that I began my working life labouring in tree and land teams, sharing with colleagues the sense of freedom and satisfaction that came from this practical, satisfying contact with nature.

Later, as I moved into outdoor learning and mental health roles, it was a privilege to see children and adults develop revelatory connections with the natural environment. Wild places offered refuge and safety, where time slowed down and people stepped away from the challenges of daily life, drawing perspective and strength from their surroundings.

I am certain that a chance to develop one's own relationship with the natural world is fundamental to being human. It supports us to thrive and recognise our place in an intricate web of life, counteracting the damage done if we find ourselves cut off from it. As Nan Shepherd wrote so beautifully in *The Living Mountain*: "... simply to look on anything, such as a mountain, with the love that penetrates to its essence, is to widen the domain of being in the vastness of non-being".

Access to the natural world, beneficial in so many ways, should be available to all. However, throughout my working life, this has not been reflected in what I've seen. At the start of my career I was always the only female on the team and faced interesting manifestations of other's discomfort about it.

Later, more males than females were referred into the outdoor provision and

therapeutic services I worked in, while gender-based decisions regularly led to boys being offered Forest School places and girls getting signed up for health and beauty.

A 2015 Sport England study discovered that there is still a 65 per cent to 35 per cent split in male to female participation in outdoor activity, with the typical profile of an 'outdoors participant' being male, white and middle-class. But things are slowly improving. It is noteworthy to report that equal numbers of males and females achieved their John Muir Awards across the UK in 2017. But more needs to be done.

## FIRST ENCOUNTERS

Engaging girls early is key. Those exposed early to outdoor experiences are more likely to choose an active, outdoors lifestyle for themselves. However, evidence shows that girls begin to

respond to the gender stereotypes around them from a young age. A 2018 publication by the Institute of Physics found that: "Young people are susceptible to gender stereotypes from a very early age. Many children self-select out of certain activities or spaces based on their observations of what is appropriate".

"By the time girls are at high school it can be too late," comments Georgina Roche, Youth Development Officer at John Muir Award Provider, Durham Agency Against Crime. "They've lost their confidence with traditional outdoor activities."

The visibility of relatable role models is particularly crucial. Research published in 2018 by Microsoft showed that having a relatable role model meant that more than 50 per cent of the 11,000 women and children

## Wild reading

There is a wealth of nature and adventure writing by women. Below are a few suggestions to get you started:

- *Dare to Do: Taking on the planet by bike and boat*, Sarah Outen (2016)
- *Abundant Beauty: The adventurous travels of Marianne North, Botanical Artist*, Marianne North/ Laura Ponsonby (2011)
- *Honouring High Places*, Junko Tabai (2017)
- *The Living Mountain*, Nan Shepherd (2011 reissue)
- *Around the World in Seventy-Two Days*, Nellie Bly (2014)
- *Going It Alone*, Rahawa Haile (2017)
- Plus, online biographies of remarkable women at [theheroinecollective.com](http://theheroinecollective.com)



interviewed could imagine a career in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) field, compared to only 15 per cent of those who had none. This does not just affect participants, but also teachers. In their 2017 study, Denise Mitten and colleagues discuss the 'Invisibility Cloak' which shrouds women's contributions to teaching and research, noting "... histories of outdoor and environmental education and current practices tend to document the efforts and achievement of men - especially white men - whereas the many contributions of women are infrequently recorded or celebrated".

But those role models certainly exist (see sidebar), with a proliferation of websites, articles and campaigns that highlight the past and present contributions of women in the outdoors. The prevalence of caring responsibilities and generally lower incomes affect women's access to wild places in very specific ways. The likes of Force of Nature, Get Out Girl, Women in the Wild, Women's Adventure Expo, and the Outdoor Women's Alliance provide online platforms where women acknowledge this, challenge the status quo and offer mentorship to others. Another, A Mighty Girl, targets younger girls with examples of adventurers, 'environmental heroes' and trailblazers.

However, even when we have good access to the outdoors, girls and women are socialised from birth to be careful, be quiet, not trust strangers, and never set out alone. We are taught that beauty and demure behaviour is desirable in a woman and that unkempt, wilderness-dirtied strength is not. But we have the same potential for wanderlust as any man. Every girl and woman should have the chance to experience the joy of the outdoors and choose how to explore it.

And if families are unable to provide this for the young, then institutions must step up. They must ensure that lazy stereotyping does not deny girls and women the right to find their place in nature by actively promoting role models and offering new ways to participate for those who aspire to a life outdoors. □

About the author  
Coralie Hopwood is Inclusion Manager  
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## Profile: Mary Ann Hooper

Mary Ann Hooper grew up in Vermont, USA in the 1950s. Well used to exploring the 40 acres of land around her home, she was already confident in the outdoors when she left her small community for university. Although not officially permitted to join the Harvard Mountaineering Club due to her gender, thanks to more enlightened peers, she became a de facto member and went on rock and ice climbing trips.

She recalls these excursions as the most important part of her time at Harvard - including one when she met her future British husband. After a year volunteering in Tanzania, she moved to the UK with him and began work as a journalist. As her husband's job moved, Mary Ann followed, leaving her own job, as was commonplace in the 1960s. She retrained as a social worker after settling in Manchester, also becoming involved in women's liberation.

Alongside the demands of raising a family, she made frequent climbing and hiking visits to the Lake District.

Decades later, having devoured "heaps" of books by women embarking on exciting adventures, she was inspired to set off on one of her own - travelling across America by bike in 2008. Mary Ann recounts this journey in her recent book *Across America and Back: Retracing my Great Grandparents' Remarkable Journey*, published by University of Nevada Press. I asked her about the journey:



PHOTOGRAPH: MARY ANN HOOPER

### Did you worry about travelling alone?

I grew up assuming I could do things, so I did them. Travelling alone as a woman you find some cultural norms work for you and some against you. It's up to you how you deal with it.

### Why this journey?

I had no caring responsibilities anymore, was divorced, had retired and so had time available. I hoped to write a book and also wanted to express my concern about climate change in some of the choices I made on the trip, and the impact it is already having on the places I visited.

### What advice would you give to other women thinking of making a similar journey?

Go for it! Be sensible, use your knowledge and skills to make judgements. I have often reflected that the risks I might be taking by getting on my bike are far outweighed by the benefits of doing it.

### Who has inspired you?

Anne Mustoe, who was the headmistress of an independent school until her early 50s, left her job and started cycling around the world at the age of 54, with no cycling experience. She wrote several books about her travels. Another is Dorothy Pilley Richards who, in 1921, was a founding member of the Pinnacle Mountaineering Club, and part of the team that made the first ascent of the northwest ridge of Dent Blanche in 1928. As her great-great nephew Dan Richards wrote, 'Dorothea was [...] to be groomed for a life of top-end housewifery, but promptly rebelled ...'. And, of course, John Muir!

Loving life outdoors: (from left) Romany Garnett, John Muir Trust; Pammy Johal, Backbone CIC; Clea Warner, National Trust for Scotland



PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN MUIR TRUST; BACKBONE CIC; NTS

## Three of a kind

**Coralie Hopwood** speaks to a trio of inspiring women about their experiences of working in outdoor environments

I'M LUCKY to meet a variety of wonderful, wild women through my work, and always find it interesting to learn more about their motivation, experiences and aspirations when it comes to making the outdoor landscape more accessible to all.

Here, I speak with three women who all work in slightly different outdoor spheres. **Romany Garnett** (top left) is Conservation Officer for the Trust's property at Quinag. Her role incorporates practical conservation, environmental education and community liaison. **Pammy Johal** (top middle) is the Founder and Operations Director of Backbone CIC, which provides outdoor opportunities for marginalised groups, particularly women from ethnic minorities. A passion for wild open spaces has taken her on numerous expeditions worldwide.

Finally, **Clea Warner** (top right) is General Manager of the North West at National Trust

for Scotland, managing properties such as Culloden, Glencoe, Glenfinnan and Inverewe Garden. She's also a keen hill walker, skier and wild swimmer.

**What inspired you to work in the outdoors?**

**Romany:** I can't work indoors. It's too hot and artificial, with too many people. I need to be in the fresh air, so I've always looked for work outside. I was inspired to work in conservation and land management because I see a real opportunity to make a difference, protecting what we still have and ensuring the next generation love it as much as I do.

**Clea:** I'm inspired by the knowledge that everything we do protects and conserves the places we manage for future generations. I'm motivated to use my skill set to create a sustainable future for the organisation. I also believe in promoting shared values to all, whether it be staff, stakeholders, or volunteers.

**What motivates you day to day?**

**Pammy:** Every day I see people go 'wow'

about the outdoors and that's it ... one 'wow' has a HUGE impact on the community. It can change whole families and lifestyles. If they love this place, they will want to do something to protect it. I love to introduce people to conservation and volunteering. It has so many spiritual and physical benefits.

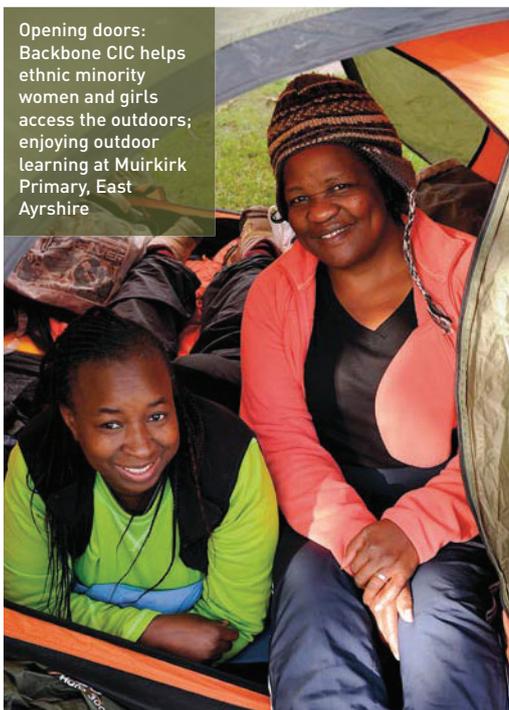
**Romany:** I am motivated by the landscape around me, being in it and caring for it. Also by the people I work with and sharing enthusiasm. If more people understand and care [about places] then the world would be safer and better protected.

**Have you encountered barriers or challenges in your work?**

**Clea:** I started work straight from school and did all my studies whilst working which was hard and not the traditional way of progressing. People tend to study first. However, it has never held me back. I got great practical experience from the outset and I have never felt my gender to be an issue.

**Pammy:** The biggest barriers are misconceptions. A misconception from

Opening doors: Backbone CIC helps ethnic minority women and girls access the outdoors; enjoying outdoor learning at Muirkirk Primary, East Ayrshire



PHOTOGRAPHS: BACKBONE CIC, JOHN MUIR AWARD

communities is that the outdoors is for big, burly, white men. A misconception from the industry is that it must treat Asian women like glass. Right now, there are ethnic minority women gagging to do this stuff, but they don't know how to. We take them by the hand. We find out where they are and go to them, invite family members to come and see that we work in a safe, respectful environment. We do all the leg work which is not easy, but that's the investment that is required.

#### How do you view the current state of diversity within outdoor professions?

**Pammy:** It's diabolical! The industry still lacks people from marginalised communities, specifically those who did not have access to opportunities growing up. This means a lack of role models for those communities and a lack of diversity in the environmental arena. We have held many free consultations about improving access and I am appalled by the lack of response there's been to them. The outdoor sector is supposed to encourage people out of their comfort zones, yet it

remains firmly in one of its own. Our partnerships with the National Parks and the John Muir Trust have been great though, with genuine commitment to promoting greater inclusion.

**Romany:** There is becoming more of a mix, although when working with schools and children outdoors, most of the teachers are female. Deer meetings are male-dominated, as are stalking, hunting and deer management generally. There is more of a mix of outdoor professionals, although there are still more men. There are some successful female instructors too but rock climbing, mountaineering, caving is often still male dominated.

#### How can we give more women access to positive outdoor experiences?

**Clea:** We need to start early. Encourage girls and women to get involved via schools and other learning channels and be clear about the huge variety of roles available (it's not all about being a ranger and being on the hill). Roles can be very flexible and adaptable which fits in well with childcare and other responsibilities, too.

**Romany:** Encourage girls to be active from a young age so that it becomes normal to them. By the time they are young women it is almost too late. Give them opportunities to get outside safely. Forest School is really good, encouraging girls to be outside in any weather. Sometimes girl-only groups are beneficial as, if boys are around, girls can stand back and let them take over due to a lack of confidence.

**Pammy:** For some communities having a women-only space is vital, or women can't join in. Our idea is to build women's expertise, confidence and capabilities, so they can use them as they choose to in an integrated world. □

Further info  
John Muir Trust, Quinag,  
[johnmuirtrust.org/trust-land/quinag](http://johnmuirtrust.org/trust-land/quinag)  
National Trust for Scotland,  
[nts.org.uk](http://nts.org.uk)  
Backbone CIC, [backbone.uk.net](http://backbone.uk.net)

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