

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study has policy relevance. The John Muir Award experience can be closely aligned with at least three of the Scottish Government's five strategic objectives, and other national campaigns.

A Healthier Scotland seeks to 'Help people to sustain and improve their health, especially in disadvantaged communities'.

- Award involvement led to increased aspirations for contact with natural environments, which has been shown in other research to help protect and improve health. That this effect was strongest for young people from the most deprived communities gives the Award additional policy significance because these are often the hardest groups to reach and support. Other research shows that those who spend time in such environments as children are more likely to do so as adults and then to do so with their own children. The Award may be making a highly cost-effective contribution to a multi-generational behaviour change effect.

A Smarter Scotland seeks to 'Expand opportunities for Scots to succeed from nurture through to life long learning ensuring higher and more widely shared achievements'.

- John Muir Award participants enjoyed the educational aspects of their experience, and felt a sense of achievement from it. They learnt about conservation and the environment and many subsequently aspired to continue that interest into adulthood. Many also learnt that they could succeed in tasks they felt daunted by initially, and that working as part of a team of friends was rewarding.

A Greener Scotland seeks to 'Improve Scotland's natural and built environment and the sustainable use and enjoyment of it'.

- The Award participants actively engaged in caring for and conserving Scotland's natural environment, and loved doing so.

Natural England's Health Campaign advocates that 'programmes providing regular healthy walks and organised activities to improve the local environment could be greatly expanded'.

Scottish Natural Heritage priority 'Delivering health and wellbeing' places a new emphasis on 'securing greater and wider participation, and in particular encourages more outdoor activity by young people, among disadvantaged groups, and in areas where current opportunities are limited.'

Conclusions from the research team

The participants overwhelmingly enjoyed and valued their Award experience. Their aspirations for visiting wild places increased, particularly among those from the poorest backgrounds. The study showed that those in the poorest circumstances were much less likely to have visited wild places before their Award experience, and that perhaps this group was most positively affected by their experience.

Nonetheless, participation in the John Muir Award did not lead to a demonstrable and sustained shift in attitudes to physical activity or to a demonstrable rise in visits to wild places. The Award experience was successful at introducing people to wild places and helping to establish aspirations for healthy behaviours but, in itself, the Award cannot translate aspiration into actual behaviour; that is something which other agencies need to prioritise.

Whilst the study findings clearly demonstrate the potential value of the Award experience as a contributor to achieving these strategic aims, the findings also highlight the extent of existing problems which require enhanced policy action. The implications are clear: more young people should have the chance to have this kind of experience, and efforts should continue to reach the least advantaged.

'Fresh air comes into your body and all the bad stuff goes out, the stuff that makes people not well like anger and stressed out.'

John Muir Award Forest School Participant, Drumchapel

There is increasing evidence to show that regular access to the natural environment is important for children's development by encouraging outdoor play and improving concentration and behaviour. For adults too, one in six of whom is diagnosed as suffering from anxiety or depression each year, natural space has a restorative effect, improving the ability to cope with stressful situations and improved concentration and work output.

Natural England's Health Campaign

'As a GP I see the day-by-day consequence of our lifestyle of inactivity and stress. The evidence that regular contact with the natural environment improves health and wellbeing is overwhelming, particularly for children, the elderly and those living in deprived areas. A natural health service should exist within our national health service.'

Dr William Bird, Natural England's health expert



Acknowledgements

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A full research report is available to download from www.gcph.org.uk or resources and links at www.johnmuiraward.org

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The Health Impacts of the John Muir Award

January 2009

Summary of a study assessing the impact of John Muir Award experiences on the health-related behaviours, attitudes and aspirations of participants.

The John Muir Award encourages people of all ages and backgrounds to connect, enjoy, and care for the planet's wild places. It is the main educational initiative of the John Muir Trust.

**JOHN
MUIR
AWARD**

wild places:
DISCOVER
EXPLORE
CONSERVE
SHARE



Study Aim

The aim of the study, carried out by a team led by Dr Richard Mitchell from the University of Glasgow, was to assess the impact of the John Muir Award on the health-related behaviours, attitudes and aspirations of participants. The study targeted participants aged 8-18, drawn primarily from west and central Scotland.

The study also looked in detail at what the participants thought of their Award experience. This involves meeting 4 challenges – Discovering a wild place, actively Exploring it, doing something to Conserve it, and Sharing these experiences – with an equivalent of at least 4 days of involvement. There is a flexible interpretation of ‘wild places’, including everything from parks and school grounds to remote wilderness settings.

Background

There is growing interest in the salutogenic (i.e. ‘health giving’) properties of ‘outdoor’ environments. At the moment however, there is rather more anecdotal evidence than rigorous scientific work to show that the outdoors really can help make everyone healthier.

We know that people who spend time in natural environments as children are more likely to do so as adults, with their own children. We also know that these environments promote physical activity and relaxation, and that they might also have other health benefits. Getting young people interested in wild places could have long-term benefits both for their development and for their health.

The John Muir Award is particularly adept at including young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This group are also those most likely to experience health problems in later life.

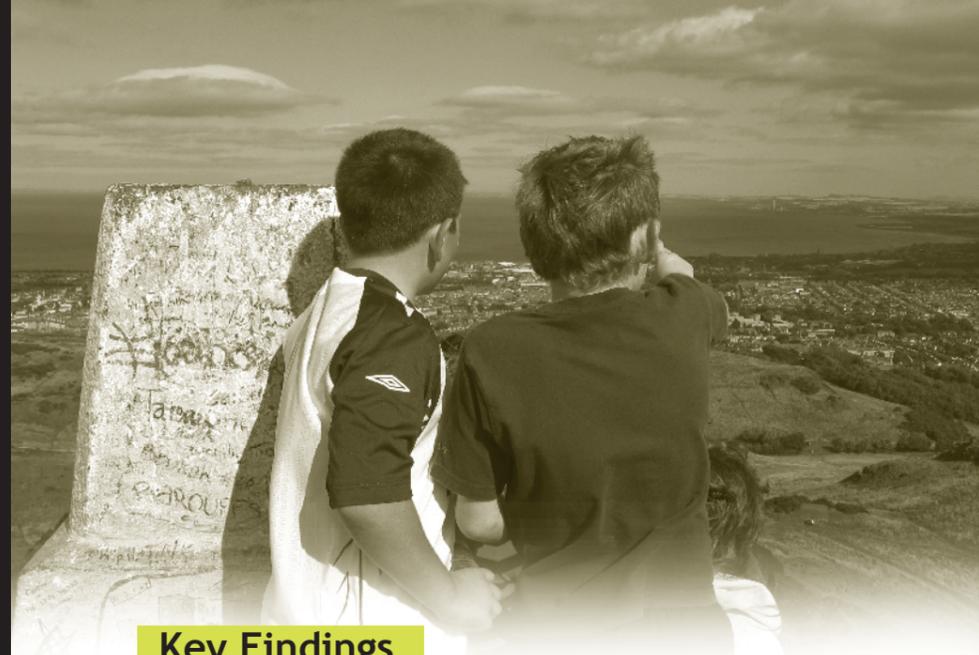
Approach & Methods

The study collected data in two ways; questionnaires and focus groups.

Three sets of detailed questionnaires (just before, just after, and an average of 18 months after Award experiences) covered health-related behaviours and opinions, experiences of wild places and aspirations for the future. They also asked detailed questions about what participants had done for their Award, their attitudes to it and how the experience might have changed their opinions and behaviours.

A number of Award participants who had not been part of the survey then took part in focus groups to discuss their experiences and attitudes in more detail. This allowed the research team to explore some of the results from the questionnaires.

There were 316 respondents initially, with follow up rates for valid responses of 65% and 34% (lower than anticipated, but not remarkably low for a study based on younger people and including a postal component). The average age of the respondents was 13 years old, and the sample was evenly balanced between boys and girls. It was possible to establish whether a respondent was resident in an area which was part of the most deprived 15% of the Scottish population. Just over 20% of respondents were from these neighbourhoods, emphasising that the John Muir Award reaches some of Scotland’s most deprived young people.



Key Findings

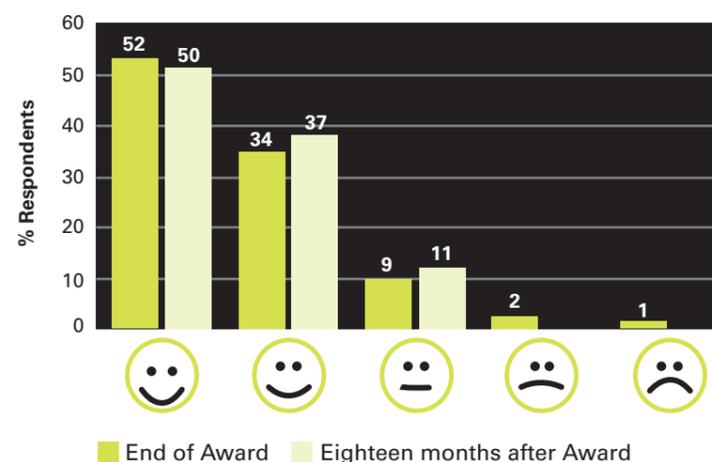
Experience of wild places

- Nearly 1 in 10 participants had never visited a wild place before their Award involvement.
- Those living in the poorest circumstances were over 6 times more likely to have had no previous experience of wild places.

Attitudes to their John Muir Award experiences

- The vast majority (95%) of respondents enjoyed their John Muir Award experience and felt they had achieved something by doing it (92%).
- Conservation activities, the chance to do new things and the chance to mix with existing friends and make new ones were at the heart of their enjoyment.

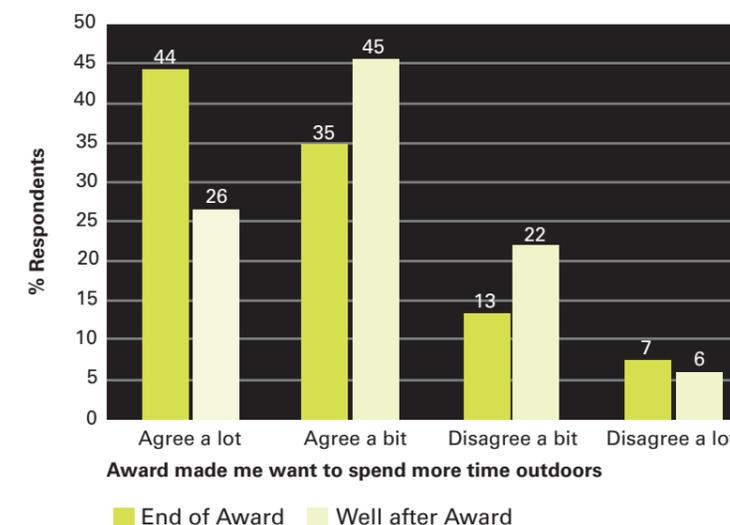
Figure 1
Participants’ feelings about doing their John Muir Award



Future aspirations

- The vast majority of respondents reported that their John Muir Award involvement made them want to spend more time outdoors, and to visit natural environments more.
- This was a sustained effect, with 72% of respondents still in agreement an average of 18 months after their Award was completed. This impact was particularly strong for Award participants from Scotland’s poorest neighbourhoods.

Figure 2
Agreement with the statement “Doing the John Muir Award made me want to spend more time outdoors”



Self esteem & attitudes to physical activity

- The Award experience had no clearly identifiable impact on self esteem in public health terms, amongst the participants as a whole. However, some individuals in the focus groups did report that their confidence was improved by their Award activities. The research team were not unduly surprised that there was not a detectable long term influence, and noted that there are many other things going on in young people’s lives which affect self-esteem.

“I think it gave me more confidence. Because I was really nervous about having to try it but when I did I just loved it so much that I got caught up in the atmosphere and it was fun.”

- Attitudes to physical activity were generally more positive for younger respondents and more negative for girls (increasingly so for older girls). Although an improvement in attitudes immediately after the Award was detected, this had disappeared after 18 months.

Gender differences

- There was no difference between boys and girls in terms of attitude to, enjoyment and impact of their Award experience. This contrasts with the gender differences detected in relation to attitudes to physical activity in general.

Visits to wild places

- Participation in the Award had no clear impact on the frequency with which young people were actually visiting wild places. 62% continued to visit wild places with the same frequency as before. This is highly likely to reflect the fact that most respondents are not in control of their visits to these environments; it requires some combination of time, parental permission, company and perhaps transport.