

Local students get closer to their National Park

Ardfern Learning Centre is an independent school in West Dunbartonshire working with young people aged 10 to 16, who have additional social and behavioural needs. The school took part in the John Muir Award to give the young people an opportunity to explore and appreciate parts of the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park they would not normally access. The activity was supported by an ongoing partnership between the John Muir Trust and the National Park, which has adopted the John Muir Award as one of its main educational initiatives.

What they did

The young people visited a variety of wild places in the National Park including woodlands, lochs, hills and mountains. The group got to know the unique landscapes through orienteering and hill walking, and took a closer look at nature through scavenger hunts and photography. They looked at the ideas of John Muir and his legacy in National Parks today. Working with National Park Rangers the group learnt new skills around rights, responsibilities and respecting the environment and the interests of others. Students made a positive difference by completing litter surveys and clean ups in two different wild places.



A focus for learning

The John Muir Award provided Ardfarn Learning Centre with a structure to frame their outdoor activities, and gave them an opportunity to recognise and celebrate achievement. The school also found they could integrate these Award activities directly into the curriculum across a variety of subjects. Leaders commented that participating in the Award also increased group working between students of different ages and backgrounds.

Developing interest, skills and confidence

“They really enjoyed it, and I was really impressed by the commitment and effort they put in.” Darren McGlinchey, Depute Centre Manager

Learning Centre staff noted increased enthusiasm and commitment from the pupils when taking part in John Muir Award activities. The students rose to the big physical challenges such as climbing Ben Lomond and Conic Hill. They were surprised by how much they liked the practical tasks like cleaning up the litter around the paths too.



“I thought it would take ages, but I was surprised by how quickly we collected so much litter, and it felt good to see it looking more natural afterwards” Sam Chilcott, Student

The young people also valued being playful outside, with some commenting that it reminded them of playing in the woods when they were little. Connor Beck, a student at Ardfern, mentioned that his favourite thing was 'falling out of a tree!'

Staff at Ardfern noticed increased confidence and communication skills from the group, which were demonstrated in their presentations at the end of their Award. These were part of their National 4 English assessment. Speaking about their experiences in front of an audience is something that many of the students would not have done previously.

Putting something back in the National Park

By spending time with National Park Ranger Tommy Gilmour, they were able to gain a deeper insight what makes the Park so special. They also became engaged in some of the challenging issues facing the Park such as anti-social behaviour, the impacts of littering, and the new camping byelaws on East Loch Lomond.

Students were able to help care for the Park by getting involved in practical activities. On two separate trips the group managed to clear 28 bags of rubbish to improve natural habitats for wildlife, and improve visitor experience. The amount was a shock for some of the group, and they spoke with senior staff at the National Park about possible ways to tackle litter problems.

"We didn't realise how bad the litter problem was until we went about the whole place. I was annoyed to see how people just drop their rubbish anywhere."
Sam Chilcott, Student



Students Jade Davidson, Jodie Brown, Sam Chilcott
Aaron Brooks and Conner Beck, celebrating their
achievements with the National Park.

A partnership approach

Doing the John Muir Award has helped Ardfern Learning Centre and its students to feel more connected with and part of Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park. Many of the young people expressed enthusiasm to return to visit some of the places and introduce them to friends and family in the future.

Bridget Jones, Head of Visitor Management, reflected on how the Award helps the Park deliver key aims and objectives through supporting schools like Ardfern:

"The John Muir Award is one of the valuable ways we reach a wide audience of schools, youth programmes, adult groups and families who live in and around the National Park. It helps us to share what's great about the Park, and support people in understanding how to enjoy it in a way that encourages us all to look after it for the future."

The next steps

Ardfern Learning Centre is putting together plans to progress to the Explorer level of the Award through a residential programme in Mull. Through their partnership with the John Muir Trust, the National Park continues to support groups to enjoy, connect and care for wild places in Loch Lomond & The Trossachs.