The John Muir Award at Beeslack Community High School: Taking Learning Outdoors and links with Curriculum for Excellence

Introduction

Beeslack Community High School is a school of around 950 pupils in Penicuik, Midlothian. Set back from the main Edinburgh Road on the outskirts of the town the school enjoys extensive grounds, with a large playing field and smaller, self-contained wooded areas, and close access to the Woodland Trust-owned Beeslack Wood, the edges of which mark the school boundaries to the east. Using this immediate environment as both inspiration and as a unifying theme the John Muir Award has provided both a concept and flexible framework around which to build an innovative cross-curricular experience for our young people.

As part of our work in Enterprise education, taking into account the four capacities of A Curriculum for Excellence and the LTS paper Taking Learning Outdoors, a programme was devised to involve the entire S1 year group (around 180 pupils) in work to achieve the Discovery Level of the Award. Rather than regarding the Award as a stand alone project, however, our intention was to fully integrate the aims and philosophy of the Award into the S1 curriculum, enhancing our wider work across the whole school within the Eco Schools programme.

Our approach to the delivery of the Award was in two main parts:

- Every first year subject lesson over the course of a specified week was given to John Muir Award-related activities, wherever possible taking place outside;
- A Conservation Action Day was organised in partnership with the Green Team, Woodland Trust, Midlothian Ranger Service and Midlothian Waste Management Team, bringing together all pupils in team-based conservation and environmental management tasks.

Preparations for the programme began at the start of the 2006 academic year. A specific week for the activities was identified (the penultimate week of the school year in June 2007) in order to be included in whole-school forward planning. Proposals had to be flexible and take into account departmental pressures and priorities. Initial plans were discussed first at meetings of Senior staff and subsequently in individual departments. Information on the Award and the four challenges, together with examples of lesson activities to stimulate discussion, were provided for all staff. Mr. Perry as project leader also attended a John Muir Award Leader Training course which proved to be an invaluable source of information and inspiration.
Activities were planned to take into account both the four challenges of the John Muir Award and the principles and developing skills of Enterprise, encouraging the exploration and recognition of individual skills and qualities, working with others, the taking on of roles and responsibilities, problem solving and communication.

**Lesson Activities and their contributions to the Project**

Activities undertaken included the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>John Muir Award Challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>English</strong></td>
<td>Creative writing; Creating a dream ‘John Muir Garden’</td>
<td>Explore / Share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maths</strong></td>
<td>Problem solving trail</td>
<td>Explore</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Science</strong></td>
<td>Pond Dipping; Surveying plant and animal species</td>
<td>Discover / Explore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Geography</strong></td>
<td>Mapping; Orienteering; Environmental Quality survey</td>
<td>Discover / Explore / Conserve / Share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td>Learning about John Muir – creating posters to ‘introduce’ John Muir to the rest of the school</td>
<td>Share</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ICT</strong></td>
<td>Creating displays and presentations; Researching carbon footprints</td>
<td>Conserve / Share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modern Languages</strong></td>
<td>Learning environmental vocabulary; Creating John Muir booklets in German</td>
<td>Explore / Share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Art</strong></td>
<td>Sketching; Creating sculptures</td>
<td>Explore / Share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Music</strong></td>
<td>Sound mapping; Performing samba outdoors</td>
<td>Discover / Explore / Share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drama</strong></td>
<td>Devising, performing and filming events on or around ‘A Park Bench’</td>
<td>Explore / Share</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CDT</strong></td>
<td>Tree identification and design; Making and placing bird feeders</td>
<td>Discover / Explore / Conserve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home Economics</strong></td>
<td>Needlework inspired by gathered objects; Making bird cake</td>
<td>Explore / Conserve / Share</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Maths we were the first group back so we got to go again with an extension sheet. We got really muddy – it was so fun! Naomi

Each pupil was issued with a Record book and encouraged to use it as a personal record of the project. A prize was offered for the most imaginative and creative example.

In ICT I learned that if every single person was like me we would need two worlds. Amy

Limbs of a tree like twisting and turning arms and legs.  
Brances like bony wooden fingers.  
Grass like a cold green carpet on the ground.  
Faces on the trees like grumpy old men – a waterfall of leaves on the wall.  

David
**Conservation Action Day**
We were grateful to have been given support from a range of outside agencies. Up to 80 pupils at a given time worked simultaneously in five targeted areas under the guidance of eleven activity leaders. Activities were designed to raise awareness of environmental issues and give an opportunity for pupils to put something back into the local community.

- The Woodland Trust oversaw the clearing, repair and resurfacing of steps leading into Beeslack Wood, an area used daily by the pupils and the wider public;
- Midlothian Rangers worked with pupils in clearing and improving access to a nature trail;
- The Green Team educated pupils in the problem of invasive plant species, leading to the clearance of patches of rhododendron and knotweed;
- All pupils were involved in litter picking, with the Midlothian Waste Management Team on hand to offer advice on recycling - in all approximately 60 bags of rubbish were removed, together with around 1400 litres of recyclable materials.

Yesterday's event was a great success as far as the Trust was concerned. All the young people were incredibly enthusiastic and I think everyone learned some new skills and enjoyed themselves. They also did a fantastic job on the steps, clearing out mud, replacing broken timbers and refilling the steps with two tonnes of stone. Hopefully they will take a well-deserved pride in their work each time they use the steps.

*I was also delighted to have the school involved more closely in the woodland, and I hope that we can continue this cooperation in future.*  
Roy Barlow, Woodland Trust

*I got really mucky but it was really cool and I can’t wait to do it again!* Kimberley

Taking the whole process of teaching and learning into an outdoor setting, learning about environmental issues through exploration and action, has made a positive contribution to the education and personal development of our young people. Using the John Muir Award framework has encouraged our pupils to explore their familiar, everyday environment, to look at it with new insight and appreciation, to take responsibility for it. The project has been a genuinely motivating and enjoyable educational experience for both pupils and staff.

As teachers it is easy to become creatures of habit, confining planning, teaching and learning to the four walls of the classroom. Working outdoors has added value to the learning experience of our pupils and has opened up new and exciting possibilities in the development of our whole school approach to teaching and learning.
Outcomes : The John Muir Award and A Curriculum for Excellence

**Successful Learners**…with
- Enthusiasm and motivation for learning
- Determination to reach high standards of achievement
- Openness to new thinking and ideas
And able to…
- Use literacy, communication and numeracy skills
- Use technology for learning
- Think creatively and independently
- Learn independently and as part of a group
- Make reasoned evaluations
- Link and apply different kinds of learning in different situations

Working within the framework of the John Muir Award has seen learners actively engaging with their immediate environment, viewing it through fresh eyes and with a new understanding. Taking learning outdoors has allowed pupils to explore freely, both together and independently, giving an opportunity to learn in a different context and find strengths not demonstrated in the classroom.

**Confident Individuals**…with
- Self respect
- A sense of physical, mental and emotional well-being
- Secure values and beliefs
- Ambition
And able to…
- Relate to others and manage themselves
- Pursue a healthy and active lifestyle
- Be self-aware
- Develop and communicate their own beliefs and view of the world
- Live as independently as they can
- Assess risk and take informed decisions
- Achieve success in different areas of activity

Working outdoors helps children develop confidence and so become more independent. As they gain confidence this impacts on their self-awareness, self-esteem and general emotional and mental well-being. Involvement in the John Muir Award has encouraged and reinforced personal confidence, respect and social development.

**Responsible Citizens**…with
- Respect for others (and the natural/cultural heritage)
- Commitment to participate responsibly in political, economic, social and cultural life
And able to…
- Develop knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland’s place within it
- Understand different beliefs and cultures
- Make informed choices and decisions
- Evaluate environmental, scientific and technological issues
- Develop informed, ethical views of complex issues

The John Muir Award activities have given pupils an opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding of environmental issues, both locally and in a wider, global context, developing informed and ethical opinions. They have shared in activities demonstrating care and respect for others and for the natural environment, working with pride both for themselves and their community. Pupils have experienced meeting and learning about people and organisations involved in caring for the environment and seeing how they might be involved in the future by contributing their time and new skills as volunteers.

**Effective Contributors**…with
- An enterprising attitude
- Resilience and self-reliance
And able to…
- Communicate in different ways and in different settings
- Work in partnership and in teams
- Take the initiative and lead
- Apply critical thinking in new contexts
- Create and develop
- Solve problems

The John Muir Award activities were carried out individually, in pairs or small groups, where different roles were allocated and developed and pupils had the opportunity to take the initiative. Pupils spoke and shared ideas with peers and a range of adults and were encouraged to think creatively to solve problems and cope with new situations.

Jake Perry, PT Enterprise, Beeslack Community High School
Toby Clark, John Muir Award
October 2007
The John Muir Award was first run as an integral part of an outdoors study week at Beeslack Community High School in 2007. After this initial pilot staff reviewed what has worked well, and identified how the programme could be improved for 2008. This summary outlines the strengths of the programme and the changes that were put in place.

**Strengths of the project**
Staff found that the four Award challenges successfully linked with the Curriculum for Excellence, and in particular that a targeted week of outdoor activities gave pupils a stimulating learning experience. Other identified key strengths included:

- Success of the Award as a cross-curricular linking theme;
- Clear teaching and learning benefits of taking learning outdoors;
- An opportunity for creativity and use of a variety of teaching and learning approaches;
- Opportunities for pupils and staff to work with outside agencies and gain an insight into their work;
- Continued development of ‘enterprising attitudes’ through tackling new and unfamiliar challenges;
- Further development of individuals as ‘responsible citizens,’ increasing awareness of responsibilities as a member of the community.

**Improvements**
The main change in year 2 was a matter of timetabling. In year 1 the conservation activity was at the end of the week, helping to bring all that had been learned into sharp focus. In year 2 the hands on conservation activity was scheduled at the beginning of the week to act as a ‘launch’ of the Award. This change helped to provide a stronger emphasis on caring for wild places and an ongoing context for Award activity.

The benefits became evident as pupils started the week motivated and with a genuine sense of achievement. The outdoor activities were designed so that they could be reinforced and extended during classroom learning. Environmental themes were introduced such as recycling from both a local and global perspective (with assistance from The Waste Aware Team from Midlothian Council) which could then be referenced and built on during the week.

**Meeting the Conserve Challenge**
Planning for the conservation task began early with the Green Team, Woodland Trust and Midlothian Rangers to identify and finalise possible conservation tasks. The specific tasks identified included:

- improving an area of pathway in the woodland;
• clearing a fence between the school and Woodland Trust land to allow for easier access and creation of a more natural boundary;
• creating a planting area for further development in future years – clearing then planting willow in 2008 (for use in Art and CDT departments), followed by fruit trees and rhubarb (for use in Home Economics) during 2009.

“During the conservation activity pupils surpassed all our expectations in what they managed to complete”. Teacher, Beeslack Community High School

Staff sought to strengthen links between the school and the wider community. Working with a nursing home that adjoins the school, pupils restored a path running alongside a former curling pond. The completed path now gives residents, staff and pupils the opportunity to make use of this area at all times of year.

Litter picking and sorting continued to be an important element, helping to raise awareness of the effects of litter on the environment. As part of an extensive clear up, pupils, led by the Green Team, removed litter from a burn in Beeslack wood which had lain undisturbed for years. Some financial support was given by the Penicuik and District Crime Prevention Panel.

“We found some amazing things- shopping trolleys, a fridge, old bed, road signs, cones and even a motorbike. I enjoyed filling up the skip and seeing the burn clean again”.
Pupil, Beeslack Community High School

As a school we remain committed to the John Muir Award. It’s now firmly part of the school curriculum and we welcome the opportunities for learning that it affords our young people. Planning is underway for improvements for 2009, with a focus on a ‘share’ exhibition at the end of the week. This aims to allow family, friends and members of the wider community an opportunity to see what the pupils have achieved.

Jake Perry,
PT Enterprise Beeslack Community High School
November 2008