

## Taking the Geography curriculum outdoors with a whole year group

Balshaw's High School in Lancashire is enthusiastic about educating students on issues of sustainability and conservation. To help promote this, it has successfully introduced the John Muir Award to all Year 7 students through their Geography lessons. The school is committed to generating an interest and passion for wild places at school, home and further afield - particularly as some pupils have had limited experiences of the outdoors.

**"Engaging with pupils in an outdoor learning environment harnesses a different kind of enthusiasm. It is uplifting and stimulating, it appeals to the academic, the creative, the thoughtful, the energetic, the spiritual, the poetic, the scientific and the environmental."**

Megan Brierley, Curriculum Leader for Geography

### Linking the John Muir Award and the National Curriculum

Pupils focussed their John Muir Award involvement on the school grounds, taking part in a range of activities linked to the Geography curriculum. Mapping diverse wild spaces using satellite images, and exploring different species, ecosystems and habitats prompted students to create their own mind maps and consider their own emotional connections with the environment. Sharing this with friends, families and classmates through artwork, poetry and prose, information guides and demonstrations added a valuable dimension and cross-curricular learning. They engaged all their senses through exploration activities, and developed an understanding of John Muir's relevance today. A deciduous copse in the school grounds became the focus for their conservation activities: national surveys for OPAL, litter patrols and the design and creation of bug and hedgehog hotels.



[The John Muir Award and the National Curriculum](#) resource considers how the Award can be integrated into many areas of the curriculum and support key initiatives in schools.



Using the John Muir Award supported a holistic approach to learning in Geography. It provided a framework to link different aspects of the curriculum - including map skills, biodiversity, ecosystems, emotional and personal geographies - to the real world, sustainability and UK landscapes. This helped engage pupils who struggle with written work to make connections with the subject and wild places in a way that could not have been achieved in a classroom setting alone.

**"I understand more about nature and how we can look after our environment. Doing the John Muir Award has helped me to notice the beauty of any place outside"** Year 7 pupil

## Delivering a John Muir Award to a whole year group can bring specific challenges.

### How did Balshaw's High School successfully manage this?

The 5 members of the Geography Department have delivered the John Muir Award to 190 Year 7 pupils during the summer term for two consecutive years. Planning ahead, making use of the school grounds, and involving all staff and teaching assistants, as well as informing parents and pupils, were important to maintaining the quality and consistent understanding of the John Muir Award.

#### Planning and staff involvement:

The Geography department worked together to complete a [Proposal Form](#). Their shared passion and good understanding of the John Muir Award's ethos and Criteria enabled them to plan a wide range of activities to fulfil the four Challenges, whilst working towards curriculum outcomes. Pupils were given a folder and checklist detailing basic activities to be completed and, where appropriate, any evidence needed. These folders helped staff to continuously monitor how well pupils engaged with the John Muir Award, and encouraged pupils to reflect on what they were doing and why.

#### Delivery of the John Muir Award as part of the Geography Curriculum:

The Geography department based the summer term's work on the John Muir Award. A scheme of work was written to integrate its four Challenges with lesson objectives, differentiated resources and curriculum assessments. Staff made use of lesson time, homework tasks and holiday projects to ensure all students exceeded the minimum time commitment of 4 days for the Discovery Award. During their activities students worked in small groups, which motivated them to take greater individual responsibility for their inputs.

#### Use of school grounds:

The school grounds – a mixed deciduous copse with mature trees, shrubs, overgrown weeds and dilapidated paths, a brook and manicured playing fields - provided a variety of wild places to discover. This meant easy accessibility for the whole year group to explore and enjoy at different times of the day, in all seasons, and in different weather conditions. Using their own local wild place inspired pupils to take greater ownership and responsibility for their actions.

#### Review and reflect:

The [Four Challenge Review Form](#) provided an opportunity for pupils to individually reflect on their understanding of the John Muir Award and what they'd done towards it. Sharing this with each other and staff encouraged feedback for future outdoor learning projects. A presentation evening involved parents/carers, staff, teaching assistants and students. It gave pupils a real sense of pride in what they had achieved and gave everyone involved the opportunity to celebrate and reflect on their successes together.

### Next steps

Staff have noticed that pupils have developed skills in communicating their connections with each other and the world around them, and have grown in confidence along the way. The school is committed to a third year of outdoor learning with the John Muir Award.

**"Our pupils have thoroughly enjoyed such a unique and stimulating experience. They bounce into lessons chorusing "Is it an outdoor lesson today?" and take real pleasure in having ownership over what lies outside the door." Geography Teacher**

