

## A values perspective on John Muir Award communications

The John Muir Trust believes that wild places are essential for the wellbeing of people and wildlife. Inspired by the ethos of John Muir, the founding father of the modern conservation movement, we want everyone to experience the sense of joy and wonder that first-hand experiences of nature can offer, and we want to encourage active care for nature in a way that promotes values associated with wildness and the natural environment.

### What are values and why do they matter?

Chris Rose of Cultural Dynamics describes values as “the nest of beliefs and motivators - largely subconscious - that underpin our attitudes to almost everything we encounter.”<sup>1</sup> As guiding principles, values determine how we behave - including our attitudes and responses to the world around us. This means that understanding values is central to effective and lasting behaviour change as it helps us to understand why we do what we do, and how this can be influenced.

Nature experiences can significantly impact on behaviour, bringing caring values to the fore. Research shows, for example, that feeling a complete and overwhelming sense of awe - such as gazing out at a starlit night or witnessing an exhilarating view- can encourage people to be more patient, less materialistic and more willing to volunteer time to help others.<sup>2</sup> Being exposed to nature has also been shown to increase cooperative and sustainable behaviours.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside the impact of such direct experiences, researchers have explored how the way in which messages are communicated has the potential to activate our values, and to reinforce and strengthen them over time. Two key groupings of values that are particularly relevant to conservation work are ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’. Values relating to social and environmental matters, embracing themes such as equality, compassion and harmony with nature, are termed ‘intrinsic’; ‘extrinsic’ refers to self-focused values, including power, status and achievement.

The John Muir Trust has worked with [Common Cause](#), an organisation promoting the case for working with cultural values.<sup>4</sup> As part of this engagement, holding workshops with groups that deliver the John Muir Award helped us to share ways in which outdoor activities and settings can stimulate certain values, especially intrinsic ones, such as awe and wonder, curiosity, and a sense of unity with nature. See box for more details.

<sup>1</sup> Cultural Dynamics [www.cultdyn.co.uk](http://www.cultdyn.co.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Rudd, M, Vohs, K & Aaker, J (2012) “Awe Expands People’s Perception of Time, Alters Decision Making, and Enhances Well-Being” *Psychological science* (23) pp.1130-6

<sup>3</sup> Zelenski JM, Dopko RL & Capaldi CA (2015) “Cooperation is in our nature: Nature exposure may promote cooperative and environmentally sustainable behaviour” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (42) pp.24-31

<sup>4</sup> Common Cause Foundation <http://valuesandframes.org/>

## Common Cause for Nature

This 2013 report explores the relevance of a values-based approach for the sector, based on analysis of publications and communications of 13 conservation organisations (including publications relating to the John Muir Award).<sup>5</sup> It examined how their messages reached people in relation to their aims, and how these related to a suite of values.



The report highlights opportunities for any organisation with a conservation agenda to communicate in ways that can encourage people to appreciate nature, its beauty, their connection with the natural world and its inherent value. Its overall message is that over time, consistent messaging about the natural world can reinforce such values, encouraging people to prioritise these over other, more self-interested values. It recommends avoiding the promotion of conflicting values, which can cause confusion and are unlikely to effectively motivate people.

See the Common Cause for Nature report for further recommendations at [valuesandframes.org/downloads](http://valuesandframes.org/downloads)

## Values promoted through John Muir Award narratives

Since the publication of Common Cause for Nature, the John Muir Award team has continued to consider how values are presented within our communications. We regularly review the way we talk about the John Muir Trust and its engagement work, our partnerships and grassroots activity, and the values conveyed through case studies, stories and resources. These capture and share what people do through their John Muir Award participation and what they take away from it.

### Pro-environmental values

Given the John Muir Award's focus on experiencing, looking after and feeling inspired by nature, it's unsurprising that 'universalism' values such as being part of nature, protecting the environment and a beautiful world frequently crop up.

Commonly expressed themes of connection and the deepening of a relationship with nature are evoked in the words of individual participant [Ingrid Todd](#), for example: "We had established a connection between ourselves and the landscape. We hadn't assumed ownership, but had assumed some responsibility."

Others evoke a sense of immersion in nature, as noted by a pupil participant at [Fairfield High School](#): "I reached the top first to experience a stunning view and be buffeted by the strong wind. It's these sorts of moments that I relish and could fully appreciate how incredible our world can be." Quotes like these help to share how amazing wild places can be and reinforce the impact of direct experiences outdoors.



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<sup>5</sup> Common Cause for Nature: [valuesandframes.org/downloads](http://valuesandframes.org/downloads)

## **Self-direction values**

Examples of 'self-direction' (referring to independent thought and action) and individual expression are also frequently referenced, highlighting the variety of imaginative, artistic and resourceful ways in which people enjoy the outdoors while being involved in the Award scheme.



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“Using wild places as a backdrop for imaginative play...inspired talking and laughing with friends, often with creative results such as an impromptu grass trumpet orchestra and a ‘Pooh sticks’ tournament”, according to [Shirland Primary School](#). Linking with initiatives such as [It’s our World](#) has also offered opportunities to further promote environmental and sustainability issues through embracing creativity.

Personal development is a key driver for a number of organisations that use the John Muir Award. Their stories in particular often illustrate how participants may pursue their own interests, set their own challenges and take ownership of decision-making. “The idea of ‘challenge by choice’ encourages the young people to push themselves at a level appropriate for them and promote the idea that what they put in, they will get out,” explained [Lookwide UK](#). The importance of these values is also often captured when participants and leaders talk about impacts such as boosting self-esteem and wellbeing, and recognising wider achievements of individuals, as with this [Finding Futures participant](#) - “I had a sense of wellbeing because of what I’ve done and achieved. I’m satisfied I’ve put a little back. I’m at one with myself.”

## **Pro-social values**

Values relating to ‘benevolence’, such as honesty, and spirituality, are less frequently seen as key themes in stories of the John Muir Award in action. Where present, these tend to be expressed in relation to developing friendships and creating opportunities to interact with others. For example, a participant from the Education Futures Trust recognised the impact of spending time with the group: “I learnt how to respect nature and respect everyone in the group.”

Another area where pro-social values are seen relates to Family John Muir Award involvement and community engagement. “It has helped us to develop the wild places in our school grounds, whilst developing and strengthening relationships with parents and the local community” said staff at [Golfhill Primary School](#), for example.



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## **Talking about achievement**

‘Self-interest’ values are rarely expressed by participants or organisations as motivations for their involvement in the John Muir Award, or what they’ve taken away from it. Values such as

power, material success and prestige aren't prevalent. 'Sense of achievement' is a common theme articulated by both participants and leaders on their behalf. Exchanges on this theme embrace not only an element of status or recognition gained but crucially reflect achievements such as developing new skills, building confidence and taking pride in making a positive difference for their local community. This is particularly true of 'inclusion' organisations working with those facing disadvantage, many of whom may receive little recognition in more traditional, academic or career-orientated settings. [Tomorrow's People](#), for example, note that "There was a strong focus on learning new skills, planning and recognising achievement. A hands-on environmental project fitted the 'conserve' requirement of the John Muir Award, and gave group members the opportunity to take pride in making a difference to their location."

### **Other common values - expressing enjoyment and excitement**

Expressions of fun and enjoyment are common to the many examples of Award activity that we share, including how participants tackle challenges, try exciting things and get in touch with their inner adventurer. Much of this has echoes of Muir. It's a key principle of our work that this enjoyment remains at the heart of people's experiences in wild places. Saint Thomas Aquinas offers a reference point from the 14<sup>th</sup> century: "We change people by delight and pleasure." It encourages people to keep getting outdoors, and to continue doing, learning and caring in their own ways.



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### **What does this tell us?**

These examples (indicative of many more case studies and stories) illustrate that creating and sharing narratives of how people engage with wild places in meaningful, creative and fun ways can help to embed and perpetuate positive actions. Communicating experiences doesn't just inspire more people to visit wild places; telling these stories and engaging audiences with intrinsic values can also have a positive impact, helping to reinforce and strengthen the importance attached to these values over time.<sup>4</sup>

Research shows that promoting pro-social values can also help to activate pro-environmental values, and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> As a less prevalent theme in our current John Muir Award stories, this highlights an opportunity for us to talk more about connections with people and society. This might include sharing more of the examples we see of Award participants getting involved in 'bigger picture' debates on topics such as sustainability and climate change, and of organisations that use the Award to help reduce social isolation and foster healthy, lasting relationships with others. Continuing to highlight the positive ways that people build

community links and do their bit to enhance nature through our periodic [Conserve Audits](#), and to promote social action campaigns, such as the [#iwill campaign](#), to our Providers and supporters can also support and strengthen these messages.

As a staff team, having conversations about values raises our own awareness of how we talk and write about the John Muir Award and the wider work of the John Muir Trust, and how others make use of it. Looking at our own work and priorities through a values lens helps to promote a culture of positive exchange about people and nature, and to reflect on the encouraging and optimistic actions people are engaging in across the country to enhance nature.

## Looking ahead

Achieving lasting behaviour change is fundamental to the broad conservation agenda. Delivering on the John Muir Trust's vision of "a world where wild places are protected, enhanced and valued by and for everyone" depends on it. We're excited and proud of the wide range of ways we see people across the country getting hands-on with nature, taking responsibility and having fun in the outdoors. By nurturing and celebrating these positive attitudes towards the inherent beauty of nature, we hope to help strengthen the value people place on their own connection with wild places and the actions they can take to help nature wherever they are.

*"John Muir said that 'between every two pine trees is a doorway to a new life'. We step through that doorway every time we venture outside into the woods and while we're looking among the trees for signs of bumblebees or badgers, sometimes the most unexpected thing we find is ourselves."* Paul Barclay, Cumbernauld Living Landscape<sup>6</sup>

## Want to find out more about values and the outdoors?

- See our [Autumn 2012 newsletter](#)<sup>7</sup> about values
- Look at the results of our 2015 [Scotland Provider Survey](#)<sup>7</sup>, which included questions about values, wild places & the John Muir Award
- Read [case studies](#)<sup>8</sup> from Larbert High School and Clavering Primary school reflecting on values and nature, as well as those referenced above
- Use the [Framing Nature Toolkit](#)<sup>9</sup> from the Public Research Interest Centre - a downloadable guide with exercises, examples and tips for making the most of words for the benefit of wildlife
- Download [Common Cause for Nature](#)<sup>4</sup> - with recommendations on how to ensure your work strengthens values that motivate people to protect and enjoy nature
- Start a conversation within your organisation, or with John Muir Award participants, about values and see where it takes you. To help get started, try the exercises in the back of the [Common Cause Handbook](#)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wild Ways Well & St Maurice's High School [www.johnmuirtrust.org/about/resources/1333-john-muir-award-story-wild-ways-well-st-maurices-high-school](http://www.johnmuirtrust.org/about/resources/1333-john-muir-award-story-wild-ways-well-st-maurices-high-school)

<sup>7</sup> John Muir Award - What's New: [www.johnmuirtrust.org/whats-new](http://www.johnmuirtrust.org/whats-new)

<sup>8</sup> John Muir Award - In Action: [www.johnmuirtrust.org/in-action](http://www.johnmuirtrust.org/in-action)

<sup>9</sup> PIRC (2018) Framing Nature Toolkit: [publicinterest.org.uk/nature-toolkit/](http://publicinterest.org.uk/nature-toolkit/)