



## National perks

Although no two relationships are the same, the John Muir Trust is proud to have a presence in all 15 of the UK's national parks through the John Muir Award – with scope to work even more closely together in the future, writes **Richard Rowe**

**“NATIONAL PARKS** are some of the most special landscapes in this country and the John Muir Award is a great way to understand more about them.” So says Richard Leafe, chief executive of the Lake District National Park, in the opening frame of a new short film jointly produced with the John Muir Trust.

Created to highlight the many ways that people can experience such special places, the film reflects the value that the UK's busiest national park places on using the Award – and the deep relationship forged with the John Muir Trust in recent years.

Recognising the success of a similar long-term partnership in the Cairngorms, the Lake District National Park turned to the Award for its core outreach and education work in April 2011. It was a move that saw the Trust's Graham Watson work alongside park staff, initially on a three-year contract and now on a renewable one-year extension.

“It just made good sense,” explains Richard Leafe. “We felt that the Award was broad-based, provided good value, helped target younger members of the community – including the disadvantaged – and was generally more appropriate for us.

“We've got a particular issue here where people who live in the park see it as something that's for visitors rather than for them, so it's a real priority for us to engage with residents.

Thanks to the Award, we are making good inroads on that front.”

With more than 70 organisations using the Award scheme for around 2,500 people each year within the park, it's a partnership that has been hugely valuable to both parties, says Graham. “It's always satisfying to see the many ways that Award groups can contribute to park aims,” he comments.

Through activities such as planting trees, clearing invasive species, litter picking, working on footpath maintenance alongside initiatives such as Fix the Fells and using the scheme across whole year groups in local schools, the Award both assists with park initiatives and helps bring many of its special qualities to life for participants.

### NATURAL FIT

But it's not just about the Lake District. From physical activity to conservation, inclusion to encouraging family involvement, the Award's ethos and aims are similar to many of the UK's national parks; the two are natural allies, with Muir's enduring legacy as the founding father of the national park movement only serving to emphasise the fit.

From the Trust side, there is a clear sell: a well-established



PHOTOGRAPH: ROSIE WATSON

Autumn hues: enjoying Derwent Water in the Lake District (main); pupils from Ardfern Learning Centre celebrate achieving their awards in Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

**‘Our work with national parks is about sharing expertise and resources as part of an investment in common goals’**

environmental engagement scheme that helps national parks deliver on a range of statutory aims in a flexible, cost-effective way that is equally suited to schools, youth and community groups, families, outdoor centres, ranger services and others. In turn, the Trust benefits from increased activity and presence throughout the UK, with a golden opportunity to engage with a vast array of people from all walks of life.

“National parks are all about getting visitors and residents to explore and enjoy them, and maybe give something back,” says Rob Bushby, John Muir Award manager. “Most don’t try to do everything on their own – they actively seek partnerships to work towards mutual aims. Our work with all national parks is about sharing expertise and resources as part of an investment in common goals. It’s a classic win-win.”

Currently, the various relationships with national parks across the UK are as different as the parks themselves; quirks of timing, opportunity, internal structure and budgets mean that they can be broadly split into four tiers: key partners, such as the Lake District and Cairngorms National Parks, that employ staff with a specific focus on Award delivery; those that make a financial contribution to enable more Award activity within them, such as Loch Lomond & the Trossachs; others that include it within the roles of their existing staff (South Downs); and those that support local providers, but mainly serve as the wild place in which Award activity takes place.

The aim now, says Rob, is to forge more partnerships that are in line with the kind of ‘embedded’ relationships seen with the Lake District and Cairngorms National Parks. “That’s the direction we’d like to go in, but we have to keep working hard so that parks consider us a worthwhile and cost-effective way of contributing to their own aims and priorities.”

#### LONG-TERM LINKS

Given the length of the partnership – 11 years and counting – it is the Trust’s relationship with the Cairngorms National Park that provides the most powerful demonstration of what can be achieved. Today, it’s a partnership that has everything: long-term relationships with a wide range of groups (60+ providers, 2,000+ Awards each year) that together raise awareness and understanding of the area’s special qualities, while also tapping directly into specific park aims – from conserving the area’s natural and cultural heritage to simply encouraging people to step outside and get their hands dirty.

It helps of course that the John Muir Award has been built into the DNA of the park, with a formal partnership in place since its inception in 2003. Unlike the set-up within most national parks, the Cairngorms does not operate a ranger service or directly deliver anything like learning and education – so an external partner was needed.

“Use of the Award for outdoor learning was one of the very first decisions made by the Park Authority,” explains Al Smith, the park’s outdoor learning officer and man on the ground for the Award. “From the beginning, the Award was seen as a way of engaging a lot of people in many different ways and there was little point trying to create something that already existed.”

Key to success in the Cairngorms is that great care is taken to understand what the park is trying to achieve and then demonstrate the value of the Award in relation to those aims. Crucially, it’s been proven that having one member of staff in place as a catalyst for making Award activity happen is equivalent to having an education team of three or four people delivering park messages and aims. “At a time when all national parks are seeing budgets squeezed, that offers pretty good value,” says Al.





PHOTOGRAPH: THE BROADS NATIONAL PARK

Today, huge amounts of Award-related activity take place within the park. One initiative has seen the development of a Junior Rangers programme for 11 to 18-year-olds that helped create young 'ambassadors' for the park. Elsewhere, as part of a school curriculum with outdoor learning at its heart, all first and second year pupils at Grantown Grammar undertake their Discovery and Explorer Awards. It's a priceless example of engagement that sees some 600 children throughout the school learn all about Muir, the park and why it is so special.

#### PARK PROGRESS

For now, relationships with national parks elsewhere remain very much works in progress – albeit with many significant steps forward. In Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park, for instance, Trust staff member Bethan Haston is half way through a two-year post that sees her dedicate one day a week to park-related activity. An initiative designed to integrate the Award within the park's education, outreach and volunteering service, it has already met or far exceeded targets in terms of the number and scope of Awards achieved, plus related training for park staff and local organisations.

"It's been a hugely successful first year, with the Award used widely as a tool for engagement and learning by full-time and volunteer rangers, as well as those working in policy, engagement and conservation," explains Bethan.

Elsewhere, with a greater staff presence in England, the Award team has been able to grasp opportunities for developing long-term relationships that were previously out of reach. From Dartmoor and Exmoor to the Broads, Northumberland and Peak District National Parks, all are embracing the Award in various ways.



Building bridges (clockwise from left): Award activity in Thurlton Fen, the Broads; participants from the Sussex Downs College iProject Outdoor Construction Group; pond dipping at Insh Marshes with the RSPB

Perhaps one of the biggest recent success stories has involved the South Downs National Park, says Andy Naylor, the Award manager for England. Around 18 months ago, the park appointed a new learning officer, with delivery of the Award built into the job description. With the appointee already a fan, the result is a huge enthusiasm for growing Award activity within the park, particularly in terms of involving schools and other education groups.

Meanwhile, use of the Award is now referenced in the park's five-year management plan and incorporated into its Learning Zone website. Participants even receive co-branded Award certificates at the end of their endeavours. "It's often the case that we need 'champions' within parks to help generate momentum and that's exactly what has happened within the South Downs National Park," explains Andy.

Elsewhere, the Award manager in Wales, Phil Stubbington, works closely with all three Welsh national parks – with the relationship with the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park the most advanced of the three. "The park directly delivers the Award with a wide variety of groups and has done particularly well supporting it within a lot of inclusion work across Pembrokeshire," he explains. "It's also moved beyond direct delivery to provide training and supported input for other organisations."

The Brecon Beacons is another that has really begun to advocate Award benefits to park users. "It's been really successful in working with youth rangers, using the Award as part of work experience for people between school and college," adds Phil.

While identical approaches are not always possible, the level of engagement seen in the Lake District and Cairngorms provides a useful point of comparison when approaching others. "They are





important relationships that show parks what works elsewhere and what could work for them," says Andy Naylor.

In the case of the Lake District National Park, chief executive Richard Leafe is very clear about how the Award helps feed into park objectives. "The Award is about engagement and learning, but for us the priority is also to talk about our vision for the national park – our contemporary agenda," he says. "As well as landscape and biodiversity, we've taken the Award into other areas ... creating vibrant communities, affordable housing, transport and involving families in physical activity.

"It's a difficult message to get across, but that's one of the advantages of having a member of the Award team here with us. We recognise that it can be a slow burn but we intend to continue with the Award and strengthen our wider relationship with the John Muir Trust."

It's the kind of collaboration that the Trust hopes to emulate with other national parks as a key part of spreading its wider message about the power, value and importance of our wild places. □

#### Further Info

Watch The John Muir Award and National Parks at [www.jmt.org/jmaward-film.asp](http://www.jmt.org/jmaward-film.asp)

Learn more about the UK's National Parks at [www.nationalparks.gov.uk](http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk)

And for much more on the John Muir Award, visit [www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

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## Coming soon ...

### The John Muir Award appeal

**Stuart Brooks** introduces the first ever Award appeal, to be launched in November

Since it was established in 1983, the John Muir Trust has always been about wild places and people. Our nature engagement activity came into sharper focus 20 years ago, as we looked to encourage more people – especially the younger generation – to get involved in conservation work. It came with the realisation that this was an essential key route to protecting wild places – because we value them.

Since then, the Trust has become a leading influence in outdoor learning, supporting nature connections with hard-to-reach audiences, and helping people put something back into the natural world. We've actively interpreted John Muir's ethos and kept it inspiring and relevant for today. To protect wild places, we need people to enjoy and make meaningful connections with them; it's been a core part of our work for more than a decade, primarily through our environmental education scheme, the John Muir Award.

Working in partnership with more than 1,200 diverse organisations across the UK each year, we have seen well over 200,000 people of all ages and from all backgrounds participate in Award activity. It's an inspiring and wide-ranging collaboration that generates in excess of £1million of conservation volunteering each year.

Thanks to the generosity of members and friends, we have a tremendous track record with past appeals for property purchases, land management and specific campaigns. As we consolidate our John Muir Award activity in Scotland and Wales, and build our presence in England (with Heritage Lottery Fund support), this autumn we plan to launch the first ever public appeal for this vital aspect of our work – and strengthen our ability to protect wild places for future generations.

Look out for more information from the end of November, as well as at [www.johnmuirtrust.org](http://www.johnmuirtrust.org)

