



A new perspective of Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park: A volunteer's John Muir Award experience

Around 200 people volunteer with Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park every year. They get involved in practical conservation tasks to improve the National Park for both people and wildlife and provide a warm, inspiring welcome for its visitors. This is Maggie McCallum's story of using the John Muir Award to enhance her volunteering and experience the National Park in a new way.

Maggie's aim in completing a John Muir Conserver Award was to experience the landscapes and wildlife within the National Park differently by taking time to get to know and appreciate nature on a smaller scale. She chose to focus on a specific area – from Balmaha pier to Milarrochy Bay on the eastern shores of Loch Lomond.

Maggie focused on seasonal change. She captured this through an ongoing photography and online blog project from spring until autumn, whilst continually deepening her awareness and getting to know local flora better by taking the time to tune in, look closer and enjoy the small details of the natural world.

"I've long felt a strong sense of place in relation to this beautiful area with its uniqueness, familiarity, ability to surprise and lead you in. Part of what makes it special for me is the scale. I've been there often yet had to ask myself how much time I'd spent looking, listening and enjoying the detail. The answer - not enough!"

Enhancing the volunteering experience

By focusing on the smaller details and beauty of nature, Maggie has been able to see the National Park through a different lens, heightening her awareness of how the Park changes throughout the seasons.

A passion for volunteering with the National Park kept nature conservation activity at the core of Maggie's Award, including participating in Wild Park projects – priority biodiversity challenges within the National Park. Maggie also got involved in national initiatives such as Track-a-Tree, a citizen science project recording the progression of spring across UK woodlands, helping to identify possible climate change impacts.



Two-way exchange has been integral, creating opportunities to learn and share with fellow volunteers and friends, including holding a 'lunch and learn' event at the National Park office to share Award experiences with staff and volunteers. Maggie engaged others with her emerging knowledge through blogging, creating wildflower ID resources for visitor centres and chatting to Park visitors.

“Prior to doing the John Muir Award, most of the things I felt able to share were related to the larger scale, such as geography and geology making the landscape. Now I feel able to share more about the wild plants and smaller details as well!”

Broadening horizons

A study trip to Slovakian National Parks, as part of the ARCH Network initiative (an EU financed scheme for those involved in conservation), provided an opportunity to broaden Maggie’s John Muir Award scope and experience new wild places. “The trip was fascinating, a window on a different world in a way that a holiday sometimes is not.”

Contrasting the strong conservation priority of the Slovakian National Parks - and the accompanying restrictions on access - with the living landscapes approach in UK National Parks provided opportunities to reflect on biodiversity and visitor management practices in Loch Lomond and The Trossachs. The study visit also allowed participants to share their own motivations for taking action to care for the natural world.



“People speaking with us in Slovakia talked about values as they described the biodiversity of their country and the various threats and challenges being faced, in much the same way as the lovely folks at Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park do.”

Connecting with nature

Completing a John Muir Award has not just been about taking time to enjoy local wildlife and the National Park, but also about re-awakening a sense of connection with nature. Since beginning her Award, Maggie’s experiences have been enriched through finding different ways to explore familiar places and appreciate the diversity of the natural world.



“It’s been a real pleasure while hiking to stop and take time to be fascinated and enjoy the details of totally different environments. I’ve been landscape connected, I’ve been sense of place connected – I’m now more nature connected.”

Blogging has helped Maggie to process and share her feelings about nature-connectedness, happiness and wellbeing, encouraging reflection and realisation of next steps. Her challenge now is to find ways to help others deepen their awareness of nature, whilst also continuing a personal journey of learning, sharing and enjoying the outdoors.

To find out more, visit Maggie’s blog: www.thetallgrasswaves.wordpress.com