



Muir on the Moor: Forest School for College Students

“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” – John Muir

Exeter College [Apex](#) students recently discovered, debated, tested and explored this concept in great detail when they embarked on a programme of Forest School sessions. Having already been volunteering and gaining work experience at East Dartmoor over the winter, they decided to look at the Reserve in greater depth and take on new and exciting challenges. The [John Muir Trust's Award](#) framework provided the perfect opportunity to do just this.

As part of *Moor than meets the eye*, we've committed to delivering discovery-level [John Muir Awards](#) at East Dartmoor, and Exeter College staff and students embraced the John Muir ethos and got stuck in to designing their own Award content. Emma, who has recently finished over a year of work and training at East Dartmoor, was lucky enough to work with this group of young adults who need extra support with their learning. She was keen to engage them in planning their own sessions, which they took up with enthusiasm. Fire lighting, tree climbing, bird watching, tool use, plant naming and just simply walking and running around outside were all requested and incorporated, as well as integrating learning outcomes from two woodland ecology and conservation modules that the group were studying.

It was noticed early on that group enjoyed working together to take on challenges, so Emma placed team work and collaborative, experiential learning at the heart of the activities. When lighting a fire, the group divided and conquered to work out the best ways to source the skills and materials to get the fire lit (and stay lit!), so that they could celebrate with a cuppa and toasted marshmallows. The group also rose to a tree-planting challenge where one sunny February day saw them plant over 100 hazel saplings, which is part of a Woodland Trust woodland restoration project at Pullabrook Wood (read more about this [here](#)).



John Muir's philosophical and poignant quotes challenged the group to think about the reasons for exploring and conserving wild places, which not only took into account the intricate ecological balance of such places, but also their own internal wellbeing balance. It became clear that their time at East Dartmoor helped them find new ways to help achieve that balance, and to discover new tools and skills to take on their unique learning challenges for independent living and working life: precisely what the Exeter College's Apex programme sets out to do. The John Muir Award structure encourages participants to improve their own wellbeing, which aligns perfectly with the [New Economics Foundation's Five Ways to Wellbeing](#): Evidence-based actions to promote wellbeing:



The students want to bring friends and family back to East Dartmoor and show them around, and explore the wildlife as the seasons change. They've put posters up at the college to share their time with others, and are making a video of footage they shot during their visits. As they received their certificates, the students shared the following about the last few months spent discovering, exploring, conserving and sharing this wild place:

"Remember we are part of something bigger"	"There were no arguments during the time at Yarner Wood"	"I really hope to take the new skills into a job"
"Give me more tasks and more challenges, so I can get more"	"Yarner Wood makes me feel peaceful, calm and happy"	"I got to know people better and made new friends, and want to continue working with other people I don't normally work with"
"A tree is not just a tree. It is a home, a living thing, and has different strengths/uses from other trees"		"I want to keep learning... visit other woodlands research environmental issues"

Emma also summarises what leading this Award has been like for her: "This has been a fitting finale to my time at East Dartmoor; it has pulled together partnership working, Forest School training, ecology and conservation knowledge and experience, and event co-ordination and delivery. I can't recommend the John Muir Trust enough for the support they provide, and all the staff and students at Exeter College have been an absolute pleasure to work with – I've learnt incredible amounts from this group, and I'll be leaving knowing that I have made a positive difference to the place and people."

John Muir's way of thinking can have an impact on everyone, and with his birthday coming up, what better way to celebrate than by finding out more about him (here is a good start). So on Thursday 21st April 2016, on John Muir Day why not go outside, sit still and observe, keep learning... Come and explore East Dartmoor.

"Going to the woods is going home." – John Muir



Goodbye hug to the trees of Yarner Wood