Commons for all – engaging with upland commons and commoning through the John Muir Award

Building foundations for common land – a story of partnership working in the Shropshire Hills – Summer 2019

As part of the Commons are for All project the Shropshire Hills Federation of Schools, worked with the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership used the John Muir Award to engage with the Long Mynd, a local area of upland common land. In a series of visits on The Long Mynd, young people took part in activities to explore its special qualities and to learn how the land is used for a wide range of purposes by people who may have differing viewpoints.

Upland Commons and Commoning... what's it all about?

Commons are areas on which a number of 'Commoners' share rights to use the land or take resources from it, such as grazing for livestock or collecting bracken, wood or peat. The grazing rights are usually linked to farms and often passed down through generations of the same family. Common land is not owned by the Commoners but by someone else – an individual or organisation. What makes Upland Commons and commoning uniquely different from other upland farming is this shared use of the land and the collaboration required between the commoners and the land owner or manager.

Commons for all

Commons are for All is a development project of Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons - using the John Muir Award as a framework to enable more people to engage with Upland Commons and commoning; helping to recognise the contribution of these areas to the public good and to encourage us to value, care for and celebrate common land.

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More than just a bike trail - exploring the Long Mynd and its multiple uses

The Shropshire Hills Federation of Schools regularly use the Long Mynd for mountain biking and wanted to investigate other ways people enjoy the Common. They worked with Commons are for All staff to design a programme to explore who works, visits and enjoys the common and how they collaborate.

On their first visit to the common the children shared their previous experiences of the Long

Mynd and why this local space is special to them. By walking, observing and looking at maps the group got to know the area in more detail, identifying the natural features of the landscape, exploring the unique habitats and using guides to identify species of plants and wildlife. The children built on their developing understanding of the natural environment by working with an archaeologist from the National Trust to learn about the cultural heritage of the Long Mynd through its historical features.

> "I'm hoping that the benefits to us will become apparent as the years roll by, with greater appreciation of what the commoners are achieving, not only from the staff and children but also their children. "
>
> Brian Lloyd – Long Mynd Commoner and Grazier.

A day spent with Commoners and graziers helped the children understand commoning and how it interacts with the landscape. Whilst visiting a farm the group heard about the rhythms of a shepherd's year, met the hard working sheep dogs and even learnt how to age a sheep by its teeth! On this occasion the group really did get to experience the common in a range of weather conditions, braving a very blustery walk across the aptly named 'Windy Batch' to meet another grazier who talked to them about keeping ponies on the common.

The group met with a National Trust Visitor Experience Manager to look at the issues that might arise from recreational visitors. She described her role, the effects of visitors on the area and how these can be minimised. A visit to Midlands Gliding Club rounded off the day and the group went on to produce their own natural art inspired by Andy Goldsworthy, illustrating responsible recreation on the common.

Outcomes that may last a lifetime

The impact of so many visitors brings many feet of course, with erosion affecting the vegetation around the paths. With their new found knowledge and connection to this beautiful place the school were happy to work hard, with guidance from the National Trust Ranger to restore a section of footpath.

As well as the practical benefit to the land, there is the potential longer term effects of local children who now have a greater appreciation and understanding of common land and the tradition of pastoral commoning.

> "The children will never forget these days. The farming, walking, and experiencing the elements... I have spent today updating our school development plans and have included a big section on outdoor learning, caring for the environment, being adventurous and children learning to manage risks."
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> Head Teacher – Shropshire Hills Federation.

To find out more about commoning, take a look at the John Muir Award Upland Commons Resource Guide

Find out more about the John Muir Award at johnmuirtrust.org/award