

## Voices for Nature

Pupils at Sgoil Bhaile A' Mhanich on the Isle of Benbecula protected their wild place and inspired a community. By completing their John Muir Award and becoming Wild Places Guardians, they not only connected with their wild place - they saved it for both people and nature.

### Background

Pupils and staff chose to use the John Muir Award as the next step in supporting their ongoing school improvement plan, outdoor learning, climate change and Eco Schools conservation work.

Teacher and group leader Sam Minty told us in the proposal - *“we have identified a large area of the school grounds which has been lying in a semi abandoned state and we have been working to bring it to life and to be accessible to all pupils, regardless of their needs. The school has been on a positive journey for a number of years in building pupil's independence, resilience and experiences of the outdoors and this is the next step in this process. Despite living on a rural island, a large number of our pupils live in a semi-urban environment of Balivanich village with high density housing and limited areas to play and explore.”*

Having a wild place so close to the school created opportunities to build a connection that would extend beyond the Award.

Prior to the starting the Award activities, the school had already been busy planting around 200 native trees, received from the [Woodland Trust](#) and creating paths to make the area more accessible for different types of activities. Pupils made it clear that an area for play was top of their list!

With strong foundations laid by co-creating their proposal, the group were keen to begin the Award's four challenges.

### Discover

The group took a sensory approach to meet the Discover challenge, immersing themselves in their wild area to create a visual and auditory 'bank' of the sights and sounds of the area.

### Explore

The pupils explored the boundaries and mapped the area, then used old maps and pictures to compare the area before the school was built or any trees were planted. New features were found including 'The Jumping Rock' and the pond which became very important to the group.

They deepened their knowledge of native tree species, conducted wildlife surveys, and learned about invasive species like bindweed and hedgehogs—both of which pose challenges in the Hebridean ecosystem.



The group also joined up with other classes and their P1/2 buddies to take them to the wild area and allow them to explore it in a fun and safe way.

## Conserve

As well as planting more trees, Conserve activity included collecting over 80 bags of litter both in their wild area and wider community and planting 20 metres squared of native wildflowers.

During this time, things took an unexpected turn, Sam told us: -

*“We discovered that the school's facility management company had decided to bring in a digger to clear the pond area and remove the trees around it. They wanted to padlock the gates to this area which they deemed to be dangerous. The class and school were very upset by this and moved into conservation activist stage!”*

They:

- Created videos
- Surveyed pupils about their use of the wild area
- Completed their own risk assessments, identifying steps to mitigate risk
- Presented their case to the Parent Council and wrote letters to the Local Authority,
- Designed signage and educated users of the area how to be responsible and stay safe
- Encouraged every pupil and staff member to ‘adopt’ a tree, offering a deeper connection and commitment to the Wild Area

**Their collective voice was heard—the proposed work was halted!**

Their actions made a real difference: the wild place was saved for both people and nature.

“The class are happy and proud that the pond was saved, they feel that their involvement has had a positive impact on the playground and the wild area. They look forward to seeing what it will look like in 10 years’ time.”

## Share

Participants inspired others through their use of storytelling with a specific purpose in mind - to save the pond.

They shared in different ways for maximum impact, reaching the wider public through social media campaigns as well as locally through assemblies and guided tours of their wild place; inspiring people to get behind the campaign. This was a huge success and a big achievement for the school.



“Planting the trees was fun and I liked digging the holes and putting the trees in.” Val (P6)

## Impact

The pupils’ Award experience shows a deepening sense of ownership, responsibility, and confidence—hallmarks of the Wild Places Guardian level.

They’ve not only protected their wild place but shaped a culture of stewardship in the school for years to come.

Participants’ commitment to their wild place is both admirable and inspiring.

“My favourite thing was adopting the trees so that I could nurture it and I know exactly where it is”. Mia (P6)