Guardians of the Itchen: Young Voices Protecting a Wild River

Through the John Muir Award, people don't just learn about wild places – they connect with them, care for them, and take action to protect them. This case study highlights the achievements of a remarkable home education group in Hampshire.

The Junior Conservationist group chose the River Itchen in Southampton as their wild place – a chalk stream once known for its clarity and life, now under pressure from pollution and neglect. Here, they undertook the John Muir Award with passion, creativity, and a deep commitment to protecting wild places.

Their journey was inspired by influential figures including:

John Muir: His legacy inspired the children to conserve and protect the land and water in their local environment.

Chris Packham: Local to Southampton, his walk along the River Itchen motivated the group to explore the river themselves.

Bob and Roberta Smith: Their protest art led the children to create their own powerful slogans and artwork to advocate for river health.

Impact

What began as curiosity became knowledge, and quickly turned into action, with the group stepping into real-world conservation, science, and advocacy.

Collectively the group contributed 560 hours to learning about and protecting their local wild place. An impressive 75% of that (420 hours) focused on powerful conservation work which had a massive impact for the River Itchen.

They carried local stories and issues to a wider stage, raising awareness among decision makers and influencing conversations in policy spaces. Their work not only improved the health of wild places close to home but helped shape a broader understanding of what's at stake for their local river.

> " I care more about the river now that I know more about it."

Understanding what threatens a wild place starts with knowing its story; how it once was, how it is now, and how it could be if nature was able to thrive. The group listened to local fishermen's memories of diving and living with the river, and how they wouldn't do that now because of the pollution. The Junior Conservationists then explored the rivers' past, present, and future through art and ecology. They completed Urban Riverfly monitoring training to help ascertain the health of the river.

Additionally, they had a guided tour of the National Oceanography Centre by Professor Nic Bury who conducts research into water

quality in the river. Armed with new knowledge, the enthusiastic group completed weekly water quality monitoring; testing for nitrates, nitrites, salinity and E.coli. The data was used to guide conversations between local councillors and Southern Water as they looked at the health of the water and future management practices.

Their creativity did not stop there; inspired by Bob and Roberta Smith, they created powerful protest artwork as well as headdresses and masks of river creatures which they paraded in the St Denys Carnival to raise awareness of the River Itchen.

They also took part in direct conservation activities to reduce the threats and pressures their wild place faces, removing 50 metres squared of Himalayan Balsam from the riverbanks. Implementing what they learned in their Smolt Watch Training, they monitored five sluice gates with fish passageways to highlight problems and ensure the safe passage of salmon upstream to their spawning grounds.

> "I really loved learning about the river. It made me feel happy to be able to help make it cleaner. I hope more Salmon will live now."

Reaching a wider audience

Their work reached decision-makers, contributing to conversations about how the river is managed and protected. The young people were filmed and interviewed by local community members, including their MP who them invited to Parliament.

> "I am astounded at how much information they have taken on board and how passionate they have become in advocating for greater care of our river."

They shared their passion for their local wild place at the Urban Wild festival and the Trifest festival. As well as being invited to participate in a podcast.

> "It made me feel less alone knowing that other people care about the river too."

Continuing their work

The experiences of this group embody the spirit of the John Muir Award; their work improved the health of the River Itchen and empowered young people to become passionate advocates for wild places.

The group have now set up *Guardians of the River Itchen* with a mission to: preserve the natural beauty and ecological integrity of the Lower River Itchen and Monks Brook. Our mission focuses on community engagement and environmental stewardship, ensuring a sustainable future for our local waterways.

This is what the John Muir Award makes possible.

When people connect with a wild place, they begin to care.

When they care, they take action.

When they take action, they can help protect wild places - for everyone, forever.

Thank you to everyone helping protect wild places through the John Muir Award.