

Case Study



SOUTH DOWNS
NATIONAL PARK

The John Muir Award: Engaging school children with our local landscape

Background

John Muir: 'Father of National Parks'

Born in Scotland in 1838, and emigrating to the USA as a young child, John Muir dedicated his life to advocating the establishment of a government-sponsored National Parks system, conserving the landscape for future generations.

The John Muir Award Scheme

The John Muir Award is the engagement initiative of the John Muir Trust, an environmental award that encourages people of all ages and backgrounds to connect with, enjoy and care for wild places. The Award encourages awareness and responsibility for the natural environment in the spirit of fun, adventure and exploration.

Four Challenges are at the heart of each John Muir Award. Each participant must:

- Discover a wild place
- Explore its wildness
- Conserve – take personal responsibility
- Share experiences

For more information about the John Muir Award, please visit:

www.johnmuiraward.org

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If you have any questions about the award, please email the South Downs Learning team at:

JohnMuirAward@southdowns.gov.uk



The project

Heathlands Reunited is a £1.44m Heritage Lottery-Funded project, bringing together 11 organisations, led by the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA), to expand and connect the existing 1% of heathland left in the South Downs National Park.

A key outcome of the project is to engage schools within the project area with their local heathland sites.

The SDNPA has developed a model which uses the John Muir Award to engage schools with their local heathlands. This involves advocating the John Muir Award and providing basic training and support to partner organisations. The SDNPA has a critical role - being the main point of contact for schools, helping the teacher to develop their award proposal, manage the bookings for field trips and communicating plans to partner organisations.

The scheme involves an in-school introduction to the wild ways of John Muir and his adventures is followed by two days of "wild" exploring on heathland sites. There, with the support of the local rangers and education officers, children spend wild-time familiarising themselves with the habitat, its flora and fauna, as well as taking part in a practical conservation task led by an organisation in the partnership.

This adventurous approach allows pupils to immerse themselves in learning and develop a deep knowledge and understanding of this unique habitat. Additional time towards award activity is led by the class-teacher in the school grounds, comparing heathland habitat with the school's outdoor spaces.

Careful planning has been required to overcome some of the practical issues around lack of facilities at the sites.

“The children and staff were thrilled to receive their certificates, we can’t wait to do our next John Muir Award.”

Thomas Moore, Headteacher of Bury CofE Primary Schools

The outcome

Four classes from three schools across the project area have used the John Muir Award to discover their heathlands, with over 100 children taking part. Staff from 7 organisations within the partnership have been trained to deliver the John Muir Award.

The participants have learned about the local landscape, understanding how isolated pockets of heathland can benefit from a joined-up conservation effort.

Engaging children at multiple sites, being led by multiple organisations is a powerful way to teach children that looking after the environment is a combined effort and often involves the celebration of several organisations and stakeholders.

The award scheme model, created and employed by the SDNPA, is now being adopted on a trial basis by another educational charity working in the region and trained staff have gone on to use the John Muir Award with groups and schools outside the Heathlands Reunited Project.

A challenge is supporting schools and organisations to deliver their first award, which takes a lot of leadership and support from SDNPA. However, once participants see how simple the process is, they are already planning their next award.

The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP) 2014–19 sets out a shared vision for how we all would like the National Park to be in the future. It includes 11 long-term outcomes, and provides a framework for communities, landowners, charities, businesses and public bodies to work together to make this vision and these outcomes a reality.

This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:

Outcome 6: There is widespread understanding of the special qualities of the National Park and the benefits it provides.

southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/SDNP-Partnership-Management-Plan-2014-19.pdf

The future

The John Muir Award will continue to be promoted to around 4 schools per year in the project area for the remaining life of the project (until June 2021).

The funding for the education team staffing and transport will also end in 2021.

Thanks to the training given by SDNPA to education staff in partner organisations, schools will continue to benefit from ongoing support and expertise. Those that wish to repeat the John Muir Award in future with their own funding sources will be able to do so.

Highlighting new ways of working to partner organisation has also demonstrated that it is possible to use sites and reserves for school visits that were previously considered unsuitable due to lack of facilities.

For further information about the John Muir Scheme, please email the South Downs Learning team at:

JohnMuirAward@southdowns.gov.uk

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