

## Venture Scotland - Call of the wild: Promoting social and personal development through wild places



"I love the quietness. The only sounds you hear are laughter, the sounds of nature, the dawn chorus and the water from the gorge that runs behind the bothy. Being at the bothy is like being in a nature bubble, an escape from noise and intensity of the city."  
Lara\*, participant



Immersion in wild places is central to Venture Scotland's volunteer-led personal development programmes. For young adults facing complex issues, such as homelessness, mental health problems and addiction, challenging themselves in the great outdoors can be a transformative experience. Kinlochete Bothy in the Scottish Highlands provides a perfect base for getting active in the natural environment, an 'escape' into nature that offers breathing space from the pressures and struggles of home life. Participants learn to consider their basic needs, cope with change and develop their resilience while experiencing first-hand the beauty of Scotland's landscapes and elements.



For the last 21 years, the John Muir Award has been used to help frame activities as participants progressively visit, enjoy and care for wild places across Scotland. Working towards a nationally recognised certificate has helped to provide purpose, focus and motivation for service users and volunteers alike; for many, this may be the first award they have ever achieved, a highly-valued opportunity for both recognition and celebration. Planning what they want their Award experience to look like presents skills-building opportunities, requiring the young people to learn to work as a team as Robert Branter, Glasgow Team Leader, explains:

*"Listening skills, communication skills, the ability to compromise and set goals are all practised when planning for the John Muir Award. Working in this way provides valuable learning experiences in preparing participants for future employment and training."*

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\*all participant names have been changed

Building confidence and self-esteem, improving skills and developing strategies to deal with difficult situations are at the heart of Venture Scotland's approach. For many who have never left the city, visiting remote mountains, National Parks and coastal environments is eye-opening, providing space and freedom to step out of comfort zones and try something completely new.

**"I just love the views from the Bothy standing underneath Ben Starav and looking towards the Lairig Gartain ... It makes me imagine how wild animals must feel standing on top of a mountain looking over their territory."** Jake, participant



Individuals are encouraged to make choices and changes in their lives that will help them build more positive futures. Creating opportunities to tune into the abundance, diversity and accessibility of nature for everyone, regardless of social or cultural background, encourages participants to take a fresh perspective on the importance of the outdoors for people as well as wildlife.

The John Muir Award provides a natural bridge between the remote setting of the Highlands and local environments, with participants planning a series of activities to help them appreciate, connect with and care for urban wild places on their doorsteps. With groups based in and around Edinburgh and Glasgow, places chosen are often those woven into the cityscape that the young people have spent little time visiting, such as the Water of Leith and the Clyde walkway. Feeling confident in returning to local wild places is an important outcome, encouraging individuals to enjoy these spaces with friends and family in the future and to continue to seek out nature local to them.

An overarching aim, supported by this collaborative approach, is to instil a lifelong love of the outdoors and an awareness of what nature can individuals them in return. For some, engaging with nature may reawaken childhood memories and a sense of place, helping to inspire ambitions to work, train or volunteer outdoors. Being active and embracing the outdoors can support the young people to develop coping strategies and improve their health and wellbeing in the long-term, creating space to destress, feel free and make time for themselves. These restorative benefits can make a significant and lasting difference.



**"It makes me feel happy. It is great to be away from the stresses that city life can bring due to its constant noise and intensity. Without this, your mind is able to focus on different senses, sights and sounds. This calms me. It provides space to think. Life seems a lot simpler in nature and the simple things seem the most important things, such as inhaling fresh air and being able to spend time listening and looking at all the amazing wildlife busying themselves around you."** Ali, participant

*All photographs provided courtesy of Venture Scotland*



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