

Teaching geography in the great outdoors

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SGQM Award achievement

We won! The first school in Scotland to be awarded the Secondary Geography Quality Mark (SGQM) Award – what a thrill! We have had the certificate framed and proudly displayed in the corridor as a reminder every day of what we have achieved and what our students are capable of (Figure 1).

Preparing for our SGQM application was our focus for a year beforehand, and achieving it has renewed our enthusiasm for promoting geography and all that it has to offer. As Blake (2018) has noted, the Award is an opportunity for geography departments to ensure that the department's profile is more visible within the school.

The SGQM moderators' feedback made specific reference to the strength of our fieldwork:

Your fieldwork offering in particular is worthy of special mention for its range and variety and we certainly endorse your intention to enhance it still further, to raise the aspirations of your learners and secure their geographical understanding.'

Supported by this commendation, and the views of McGeown (2011), that one of the main characteristics of a successful geography department is a 'comprehensive extra-curricular activities programme', and Rawlinson (2016), that geographers should promote all

opportunities for students to work outside, I decided that fieldwork and extra-curricular geography would be the focus for the forthcoming year. To this end I established a John Muir Award Club.

Who was John Muir?

John Muir was a farmer, inventor, writer and conservationist. Born in Scotland in 1838, in 1849 his family emigrated to the USA, and he spent much of his life travelling the length and breadth of North America and beyond, exploring new landscapes, flora and fauna. His great objective was to preserve America's wildernesses, and he was instrumental in securing National Park status for the Yosemite Valley and the area around Mount Rainier (Collin, 2007). He died in Los Angeles in 1914. The John Muir Trust, a Scottish charity founded in 1983, continues his conservation efforts, and has set up the John Muir Award 'for people of all backgrounds – groups, individuals and families. It's non-competitive, inclusive and accessible' (www.johnmuirtrust.org/john-muir-award). This makes it an ideal extra-curricular club for schools.

Lisa describes how achieving the GA's Secondary Geography Quality Mark led to her department's participation in the John Muir Award, and strengthening her students' interest in geography.



Figure 1: Lasswade High School SGQM Awardees, 2018.

Purpose and progression

Field trips must always have a purpose, or goal, whether to extend knowledge or practise a skill, and should develop progressively (Widdowson, 2017). Widdowson continues to say that progression in fieldwork should be maintained, in the same way that it is throughout the geography curriculum. This is also a strength of the John Muir Award which is designed in such a way that purpose is built into its four challenges: discover; explore; conserve and share. Progression is implicit in the award scheme: the first three challenges require successively more in-depth activity; once one challenge is completed participants can work towards the next. Figure 2 sets out the preparatory lunchtime club sessions and the residential elements of our John Muir Award Club.

Lunchtime sessions

The creation of the ladybug homes was a great project; the students saw it through from design to siting the finished homes in the wild, which validated all their hard work.

The students' articles on environmental geography needed to adhere to these criteria:

1. Include a headline
2. Introduction – the topic, facts, locations, your own experiences, your opinions
3. Threats to the environment you have chosen – why is it important to conserve it?

4. Practical conservation/protection ideas – what we can do?
5. Include a photo and credit the website where you got the photo from.

Students wrote about honeybees, North Sea oil pollution, orangutans, ospreys, pollution and climate change and red squirrels. The articles all showed the development of students' ICT, research and reasoned judgement skills, together with an increased awareness of environmental threats and potential solutions. Being able to choose their own topic was motivating – their team work, enthusiasm and attendance at each lunchtime club were exemplary. In future I will use this style of activity more frequently in the classroom; personalisation and choice can certainly lead to in-depth collaboration and focused learning. Publishing the students' articles on the school's website brought all these areas of environmental geography to the attention of the wider school community.

The residential field trip

Geography was everywhere, all the time: the views we saw, the questions asked and answered, the sounds heard and the skills developed. On many of the walks we talked about a variety of geographical topics – renewable energy, footpath erosion, deforestation/afforestation, climate change and river erosion. The conversations were spontaneous, excited and thoughtful.

Day	Location	John Muir Award challenge	Activities
Fortnightly after-school club	School – Craft, design and technology department	Conserve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Groups of students make wooden ladybug homes for the new garden at Queen's View, Loch Tummel
Fortnightly lunchtime club	School – ICT room	Conserve Share	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals/pairs/groups write an article on an environmental geography topic and publish it on the school website
Day 1 (residential)	Dunkeld	Discover Explore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historical walking trail (blue plaques) Environmental Quality Index (EQI) of the High Street: worksheet
	The Hermitage	Explore Conserve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students create an artist's palette of colours of nature and identify items on palette Litter pick
	Pitlochry	Discover Explore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visit John Muir Trust Exhibition Centre Walk along River Tummel and Fish Ladder Dam
Day 2 (residential)	Loch Tummel	Conserve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Queen's View: planting trees/creating bug hotel on wild flower meadow/hanging ladybug homes with Tay Forest Rangers Evening quiz focused on the historical walking trail of Dunkeld
Day 3 (residential)	Falls of Bruar	Explore Conserve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walk Litter pick
Evening 4–5pm	School	Share	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebration evening for students to present their John Muir Award journey to parents/carers Certificates awarded

Figure 2: Our John Muir Award Club programme.



Figure 3: Falls of Bruar, Perthshire **Source:** Flickr/Kit Carruthers

At other times the geography was practically focused, as when Tay Forest Rangers talked to groups of students about afforestation, land management and careers linked with geography, or when the EQI of Dunkeld's High Street developed fieldwork skills, or getting to grips with four- and six-figure grid references using local OS maps. The most powerful geographical teaching is when your students are surrounded by the topic; it becomes as natural as the nature we walked through (Figure 3).

Reflections

The John Muir Award Club is a great way to embed geographical skills and knowledge. Links can be made to many curriculum topics, either through specific activities within the Explore and Conserve challenges (for example, those listed in Figure 2) or through the skills that students are encouraged to develop. Running the John Muir Award Club has certainly been a bright spot in my teaching year. The most rewarding experience was the genuine interest in geography students developed during the residential field trip. In my career as a teacher never have I seen a group of students who were so totally passionate about everything they did and learned, and witnessing students from different year groups become firm friends was a joy.

References

All websites last accessed 25/03/2020.

- Blake, V. (2018) 'My department's journey to the SGQM', *Teaching Geography*, 43, 2, pp. 64–5.
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More information about the John Muir award scheme can be found at www.johnmuirtrust.org/john-muir-award

The John Muir Award encourages staff and students to get outside and experience geography for real. This makes our subject come to life and can create a sense of wonder and deepen students' knowledge and understanding. Reflecting on the learning is an important part of the SGQM, and was embodied in the John Muir 'Share' presentation to parents and carers. The whole experience has encouraged me to ensure this extra-curricular club is an annual event. Last year four students achieved the John Muir Award; this year, the re-booted John Muir Award Club saw 20 students receive the Award – what a success!

Future plans

Next year I would like to continue to develop the students' knowledge and understanding of map reading, grid references and map orientation. I think there is a lot more scope for them to co-lead short sections of the walks, using OS map extracts (from digimapforschools.edina.ac.uk) and our grid referencing/scale tool, a recent purchase to help students with four- and six-figure grid referencing at both 1:25,000 and 1:50,000 OS map scales.

Running the John Muir Award has certainly reminded me why I love geography fieldwork and how geographical skills and knowledge can be taught spontaneously and enjoyably in the great outdoors. | **TG**

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