

Part 2A:

My John Muir award project focused on one of my favourite sections of the river Afan. This river starts where the river Corrwg and river Gwynfi merge, in the village of Cymmer. The river is approximately 11 miles long and flows southwest through the Afan Valley into Swansea Bay at Port Talbot. As it journeys to the sea, the river passes notable landmarks such as Afan Forest Park, formerly known as Afan Argoed Country Park and meets the Pelenna River at Pontrhydyfen. The river then flows through the village of Cwmavon, into Port Talbot and through to Aberavon where it meets the sea. My scrapbook focuses on a small section of this river in between Port Talbot and Cwmavon, where there is a walkable path which leads to Pontrhydyfen. It is also connected to a cycle path which leads to Swansea.

For the first part of this award, I needed to discover the area. I first discovered this place at around 9 years old and quickly fell in love with it. On the weekends, my parents and I would go for walks here and spend a bit of time there. This is where I learned to skip stones. The river is a relaxing place where local wildlife can be seen and heard and the constant sound of water running past relaxes me. This section of the river is levelled, meaning there are two mini waterfalls each side of this section where the water runs down a line of big rocks. When discovering this area further, I found out just how busy the path can get. I used to spend a lot of time here during Covid-19, as part of my daily exercise during lockdown as it is within walking distance from my home. During this time, there were very few people out in the same place as me at the same time, therefore I assumed it was a quiet path. As I discovered this area for the award, I found out quickly that it is a popular path and section of the river which people and dogs frequent.

This award caused me to focus on the journey and not the destination, as previously, I wanted to get to the river and rushed past everything not appreciating the natural beauty around me. During this award, I discovered and explored the different plants and greenery that live by the river. I was never aware before this award, that there were fruit trees along the path, although they are further up the path and not close to my chosen spot. The tree I discovered was an apple tree. The apple tree was tall, and had many apples growing on it, however they did not look like typical shop ready apples, as most had either been eaten by wildlife or were rotten. Although not good for human consumption, the tree provides food for local wildlife, such as birds like the jackdaw. Along the path, there is also a lot of common plants that I never knew the name of. Using the Picture this app, I was able to scan each plant and get information such as names, Latin names, origin and general information about them such as the type of species, whether they're an invasive species and a short description of the plant and health. Paying for a subscription will allow users to explore the plants in more depth, and the app gives advice on how to heal plants that may need attention.

In addition to exploring the greenery, I also explored the birds that live there. There are many birds that can be seen around the area as there is a river, woodlands, town and mountains. Examples of these are grey herons, which are not as common as other birds, but can still be seen relatively often. Blue tits and robins are very common on this path, as well as pigeons, magpies and wrens.

This river is good for local birds, as it gives them a place to drink and wash. As the river is a body of water, plenty of greenery gets its water from the river, which support habitats for birds and other wildlife such as squirrels. The surrounding greenery supports wildlife by providing seeds and fruits for them to feed on. The river is also clean; therefore, it supports an abundant fish population with fish like salmon and trout which attract avian predators to the area. Extensive conservation efforts by the council and residents have created a rich, biodiverse riparian corridor which is perfect for nesting and foraging.

As part of the award, I was required to conserve the area. This is a very popular section of the river when the weather is nice, and having recently had a heatwave, there was a significant amount of rubbish left at the river. I knew I had to do something about this as the rubbish was left in places where a high tide would carry it all down the river and into the sea. This is something I wanted to avoid, due to the discussions and problems in the world regarding plastic pollution, especially in the ocean. For my conservation part, I decided to pick up the rubbish. When I first visited the river, there was a mixture of mostly empty alcohol cans, which I felt desperately needed cleaning, as I used to visit this place as a child, and am aware that children still often visit. I would not be able to live with myself had a child gone down there exploring, got curious and drank alcohol. This is why I decided to pick everything up as my conservation project. Alcohol bottles and cans were most of the rubbish, as well as a couple of other empty bottles like lemonade and squash bottles. There were also a few pairs of shoes that had been left for a while. Unfortunately, I did not have anything with me at the time to clean it up, so I did have to leave it all down there, but I did manage to move some of the rubbish to a secure place in the open, where parents can keep children away, and also away from the tide to avoid it going to sea.

I returned later with rubbish bags and gloves and cleared the river completely. I only filled three quarter of a black bag, so I did leave it down there for other people to continue filling instead of leaving it everywhere else. I was aware that the bin was almost filled, and another heatwave was approaching, so I ensured there was enough bags for the upcoming weeks. To ensure these additional bags do not cause harm to wildlife or get taken with the tide, I made sure to place them where the tide does not

reach. My aim here was to keep the river clean of rubbish, and leave as little traces of humans possible.

Part 2B:

The John Muir award consists of four challenges; discover, explore, conserve and share. The discover challenge is about developing a connection to the chosen spot and focuses on experiencing it through your senses (John Muir Trust, no date). Next, participants are required to explore the area. This is aiming to deepen and expand knowledge and understanding of the area chosen with a sense of curiosity (John Muir Trust, no date). After discovering and exploring the area, participants of the John Muir award are required to conserve it. What this means, is taking action to protect or restore the wild area. This can be practical conservation activities, raising awareness or taking other actions to protect the wild place (John Muir Trust, no date). The final part of the award is to share what the participant has done to inspire others to care for wild places (John Muir Trust, no date).

As part of my conservation project, I picked up rubbish that had been left by others. This activity relates to current curriculum education. One of the four main purposes of the current Curriculum for Wales is for children to grow up to become ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world (Welsh Government, 2020). Sharing this activity within a classroom would enable learners to think about the changes they can make to their own areas. Their areas could include the school grounds, local area or nearby parks etc. In addition to its links with the curriculum, learners can practice this physically. The framework of the John Muir award supports a broad, balanced curriculum of its own by encouraging practical application of STEM, literacy and the arts outdoors (Canal River Trust, no date).

Litter picking aligns with the Curriculum for Wales by supporting the Area of Learning and Experience for Humanities and Health and Well-being. By using this approach, it fosters environmental stewardship while meeting critical early years pedagogical milestones such as understanding the world (humanities), physical development, social, personal and emotional development, speech, communication and language as well as safety (National Geographic Kids, no date).

The conservation challenge of the John Muir award focuses on clearing rubbish from the rivers edge and restoring the natural beauty of the area, although a positive impact on the sustainability of the river for a short period of time, it is not sustainable for the long term, as when the weather gets warm, people ignore any efforts made to clean areas and make additional mess and do not clean it up themselves. This could be critiqued as it does not offer a long-term sustainability solution and only a practical, short-term solution. The experience of clearing rubbish is beneficial to the river and wildlife, and to everyone who uses the river until someone leaves more rubbish down there. Litter picking challenges traditional views of sustainability and citizenship by shifting the focus from simple cleaning to a deeper critique of consumer culture. The John Muir award uses this practical action as a foundation to question the systemic, political and economic origins of waste. Rather than acting as volunteers who sweep up after others, participants are encouraged to recognise that being a global citizen means taking responsibility for the impact of human habits on the landscape (John Muir Trust, no date).

Children learn through the more knowledgeable other. Children also learn through hands-on experiences. Vygotsky developed Sociocultural Theory, stating children learn through social interactions with others, while Piaget championed constructivism, arguing that children learn by actively engaging with their environment through hands on experiences (Sensory Surroundings, no date). Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development relates to litter picking as it can be differentiated depending on each child's development. This also means it is an activity that can be done at most ages (The Education Hub, 2019).

Lev Vygotsky theorised that learning is inherently social. The award's mandatory share challenge facilitates this by requiring participants to communicate their environmental experiences, ensuring knowledge is co-constructed through community interaction. The program provides a scaffolded framework across four distinct stages. By progressing from supported discovery toward independent conservation, participants operate within their potential, moving from guided participation to mastery under mentorship (London School of Childcare Studies, no date.).

Jean Piaget believed that knowledge is actively constructed by the learner, not passively absorbed from an instructor/ educator. The John Muir award mirrors this through its four challenges framework. The award structure provides age-appropriate, scalable challenges that match cognitive capacity. Younger participants focus on tactile tasks such as sorting objects, while older students tackle abstract sustainability concepts, including global ecological impacts and independent project design (Landmark International school, no date). Intellectual growth requires balancing current

understanding with new data. This can be done by integrating environmental experiences into existing schemas, reconfiguring mental maps while encouraging novel, complex realities. Engaging with fieldwork often challenges simplistic assumptions forcing participants to expand their intellectual horizons by witnessing microscopic biodiversity directly through the experiences (Celinska, A, 2023).

Jerome Bruner, similarly to Jean Piaget, posited that knowledge is an active process rather than a static accumulation of facts, a sentiment which is deeply embedded in the John Muir award structure. By prioritising direct engagement with natural landscapes, the program encourages participants to function as their own cognitive architects, building understanding through sensory interaction and personal investigation (Tomkinson, P, no date). The award mirrors Bruner's belief that learning is a reconstructive act, where the individual must bridge the gap between prior understanding and new environmental stimuli. As of June 2026, this framework remains a gold standard for translating complex cognitive theories into tangible, field-based educational outcomes that promote long-term environmental stewardship among diverse demographics (John Muir Trust, 2026).

The Well-being of Future Generations Act represents a pioneering Welsh legal framework designed to harmonise social, environmental, cultural and economic progress. The policy ensures that current decision-making processes prioritize the longevity of our planet and the quality of life for those yet to be born. The framework is founded on seven strategic pillars, which are; A prosperous, resilient, healthier Wales, as well as a more equal and globally responsible Wales, and a Wales of cohesive communities and vibrant cultures (Welsh Government, 2015). Both the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the John Muir award share the core principle of ensuring the environment and society thrive today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The John Muir award directly supports these objectives by encouraging participants to complete the four challenges. In Wales, this structure helps learners engage with the local landscape and cultural identity known as cynefin, which transforms them into active planet stewards (Future Generations Wales, no date).

Children learn basic biodiversity and eco-stewardship by creating bug hotels or planting wildflowers to create a resilient Wales. Active outdoor play improves physical development and fine/gross motor skills and supports mental well-being to promote and foster the idea of a healthier Wales. The non-competitive nature of the award allows children of all backgrounds to access wild spaces, contributing to a more equal Wales. Sharing outdoor spaces builds early social bonds, empathy and a collective care for local parks and wild spaces. Additionally, connecting with local landscapes develops a child's authentic sense of cynefin (belonging) which are attributes of building cohesive

communities and supporting vibrant culture and Welsh language. The award can provide early lessons in 'leaving no trace', building a foundational understanding of the wider environment.

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