



Scottish Natural Heritage
All of nature for all of Scotland

Health And Natural Heritage Case Studies

White Mountain Dreams



Location Summary

Highlands and Islands, including Skye

Innovative project piloted 2005, now in its third year, targeting women, which uses Scotland's mountains and wild places as it's basic resource, enticing participants to change ingrained habits of inactivity by setting a series of attainable, exciting goals building up from low level walks to climbing Ben Nevis after the first six months and then on to other mountain challenges over a four year period.

Health benefits

- Improved physical fitness and health benefits from regular walking
- Increased independence, self-confidence, self-esteem
- Healthier eating habits leading to weight loss and increased physical fitness
- Personal development and transferable goal-setting skills which improve mental health and well being

Keys to success and learning points

- Wild natural places provide the essential basic resource for this project and the inspiration to engage and challenge participants.
- Offering people a guided programme of exercise goals in beautiful, wild countryside helps develop understanding that good health is the basis for a great future.
- As well as the physical benefits of exercise, the peace and quiet to be found in Scotland's wild places reduces stress and has therapeutic effects for those taking part in the programme, which also has indirect benefits for their families.
- Encouraging and inspiring mothers to be more active sets a good example for their children to develop healthier habits.
- Providing a crèche or other childcare is essential to involving most mothers of young children.

More about the project

White Mountains Dreams was set up in 2005 with the aim of providing a preventative solution to the onset of chronic ill health, both mental and physical, caused by inactivity and overeating through a series of long-term exercise projects. The project recognises that for people to develop and maintain healthy habits, exercise needs to be interesting, enjoyable, achievable and sustainable. People need to be enticed into exercise by easily attainable goals, and then excited by further challenges until exercise becomes a way of life, and good health and well-being follow.

The first step in the four-year Wildwalks project requires a six-month commitment from participants to walk once a week, every week, starting off on easy, low level but very scenic paths. There is no charge to participants and a mobile crèche is provided to remove childcare problems. Gradually walks get longer and higher, with more extreme and remote landscapes adding to the challenge and enjoyment, which in turn provides incentive to continue. After six months, participants get a real sense of achievement proving to themselves they are capable of climbing Ben Nevis, Scotland's highest mountain, or walking through Scotland's longest mountain pass, and gaining a John Muir Discovery Award. Longer term funding has been difficult to secure, but those who continue with the project go on to climb the highest mountains in Scotland, England and Wales, walk in the Alps and to Everest Base camp. The overall goal is to help individual women become sufficiently independent, responsible, fit and inspired that they will keep walking – and in turn inspire their family and friends to take up more exercise and eat more healthily.

The project specifically focuses on women who are no longer in full-time education and are unemployed or in part-time employment, single parents, mothers with young children, and others who are vulnerable because of their social, financial or health situation, typically from areas of urban and rural deprivation. Big Lottery funding has been used to target 16-25 year olds, who have proved one of the most difficult age groups to engage in any physical activity. New participants are attracted through local meetings and publicity, and referral through health visitors and agencies such as Barnardos and mental health services. In total nine White Mountain Dreams projects have run around the Highlands and Islands, with groups varying in size from 6 – 20, each with a professionally qualified walk leader who serves as a role model. Some of the individual participants will go on to train as walking group leaders which will help make the project self-sustaining.



White Mountain Dreams aims to be about a lot more than just walking in attractive natural environments. Evaluation of the project's success includes personal interviews with participants, during which they are asked what the hardest and most enjoyable parts of the project have been for them, what they have learned through the project, whether they are taking more exercise as a result of participating, and what changes they see in themselves.

“ Having climbed Ben Nevis, I know that I can achieve something now if I put my mind to it. ”

“ I've found who I am again. ”

“ White Mountain Dreams has opened up a new world for me. I feel more confident in myself. I think about the present, what I want to do, and what I now know I can do. ”

“ I've reached a different mindset. My way of thinking has changed. I'm a lot more positive and it's not just pipedreams any more, I've done it, and I know I can do it. ”

“ I want to go out and exercise now. I do a lot more walking since being involved in White Mountain Dreams. ”

Further information

www.whitemountaindreams.org.uk

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