

**Scholarship for Environmental Leaders
Growing Natural Leaders**



Julie McElroy

Acknowledgement

This log is the preface of those that have recognized my capability of leadership and have given me the credential to lead and spearhead my innovative ideas to date. You know who you are.....take this log as a token of your inputs.

Before embarking on this environmental leadership programme, I immediately began to see the correlation of what the Wilderness Foundation's website has stated in relation to the Sirius Programme, '***Scholarship for Environmental Leaders - Growing Natural Leaders***'.

This phrase '***Scholarship for Environmental Leaders - Growing Natural Leaders***' sent alarm's bells ringing! A few years ago, Ken Hames and I were invited to do an article for [Sunday Times](#). (Ken Hames, TV Presenter and expedition leader for the TV Programme: Beyond Boundaries). We discussed jointly about the common connection that we both had and driver on outdoor experiences; leadership; team-building; motivation and other competencies.

During that joint discussion/interview, Ken stated '**Scotland is a great place for natural leaders**', his words marked the platform to what Sirius Programme had enabled me to do on my home soil. The myth now surrounds that **Scotland** is the place to foster leadership talent.

Foremost, I want to thanks **Jo Roberts** the CEO of the Wilderness Foundation UK for giving me the prestigious scholarship opportunity and it will provide the backbone of fulfilling many outdoor leadership activities I have and may choose to lead in the future. This log will bear the testimonial to what the Sirius Programme is all about.

Myles Farnbank, was our expedition leader on the Sirius Evironmental Outdoor Programme. Myles comes from an accomplish wilderness background. Myles is an Outdoor Education Advisor for the Wilderness Foundation UK, and Director of Training & Senior Guide for Wilderness Scotland. He has been involved in the Sirius Programme since its inception. With more than 20 years experience in Scotland's outdoors, Myles is highly qualified in many activities with a focus on sea kayaking and open canoeing.

During the course of my Sirius's experience, I grew to have so much respect for Myles for his honesty, integrity, reassurance, expertise and for giving me the inspiration to overcome my personal difficulties and self doubt over the course of the programme. Without his constant encouragement and support I may never have experienced this wonderful feeling of achievement and self belief. Throughout this log, it will document Myles's expertise and assurance in dealing with challenging situations.

Another co-facilitator on this outdoor programme was **Sam Harrison** who is an experienced freelance guide who has worked with Wilderness Foundation UK for many years and has been involved with the Sirius Programme since the beginning. Sam works to develop his awareness of place through running multi-day projects in the outdoors with schools, training teachers and working as an action researcher on these themes. Sam brings a passion for exploring the landscape and using those experiences to link historical, ecological and cultural perspectives.

His encouragement and support has helped me embrace this wonderful feeling of achievement and self belief in the wilderness of Scotland. Sam's caring attribute throughout the programme was a great comfort.

Richard Corby, is the Office Manager for the Wilderness Foundation UK. He manages a number of education and leadership experiences for young people from all over the British Isles. This includes acting as lead on the Sirius Schools Programme launched in 2010. In addition to his education work, Richard also project manages a social inclusion programme called "Down to Earth". D2E is focused on local production of organic food crops for people in need. This includes working with the elderly, disadvantaged and people with Special Educational Needs.

It was reassuring to have Richard joining the participants as they undertook wilderness leadership experience as he was able to share useful advices that the Wilderness Foundation UK does. His support and assistance over the course of the programme was fantastic.

Ben Gill was my canoe buddy and I couldn't have asked for a better companion for duration of this canoeing expedition. Both of us went through a rollercoaster on this experience and this log will bear my tribute to him. I am in debt to him for his support, compassion and understanding. I wouldn't be here where I am now sensing the feeling of jubilation if it wasn't for Ben. Ben took in charge of the canoe in very serious undertaking and ensuring I was comfortable and doing my utmost to paddle down Loch Shiel – this was a mammoth task.

Last but not least, **Sue MacFarlane**, PA to Jo Roberts, who warmth, reassurance and keeping me updated, has been exceptional. I couldn't have asked for a better customer service!

This programme has given me the cleavage to take my project, the outdoor experiences and leadership further and beyond to other areas where I can hone my skills and my passion for outdoor further too.

Awaits near future developments.....

Yours

Julie McElroy

Prologue

Sirius Environmental Award 2011

We will work with a selection of young people who have a commitment to positive change for the environment. Scholars will spend six days in an extreme, wild part of Scotland as part of a group of eight other participants with two facilitators/wilderness guides.

The aims of Sirius are to:

- Develop leaders for the future who truly understand the crucial need for balance between humans and nature to ensure a sustainable future.
- Understand issues such as low carbon living, sustainability and conservation from a direct experience of wild nature.
- Understand and develop the needs of the individual and the group.
- Encourage personal growth through reflection and challenge.
- Give time to busy people to focus on what they are truly passionate about.
- Support graduates to develop project ideas and future action.
- Give the opportunity to explore radical & new thinking with other like minded people.
- Encourage graduates to think, feel and act about the things that are important to them.

The Scholarship Application

- Give us a brief description of a project that you would like to implement in the future - for example - addresses the need for low carbon living, responding to climate change, focuses on the environment, and/or promotes the value of nature.
- Tell us how your project will fit into The Big Picture, ie 'What difference will it make' to the bigger environmental issues of our time??
- Describe 3 key features and outcomes of your project, as well as the need it meets.
- Vision to Reality – What support would you require to achieve this?
- Tell us about yourself giving some examples of where you have shown leadership and made a difference in the past.

Sirius Environmental Outdoor Leadership 2011

Saturday 23rd July

After a bumpy start, my mum dropped me off at Glasgow Queens Street where I met Richard from the Wilderness Foundation UK and the rest of the group whom have travelled up from London overnight. They were **Hannah Mowat, Jamie Schwerdt, Ben Gill** from London and **Lisa Hughes** who travelled up from South Wales. We departed from Glasgow Queen Street at 0821 hours and arrived at Arisaig at 1320 hours. While heading to our train, I knew instantly that the five of us were going to bond extremely well.

On the way up the West Coast, the scenery was magnificent, we couldn't have asked for better weather and if it lasted for the next five days during our wilderness exploits this would be a bonus.

When we arrived at Arisaig, Richard phoned Myles to say that we were waiting at the top of the hill, however Myles assumed that we were arriving in Fort William instead so it was to be forty minutes before Myles was able to collect us!! We went into Arisaig and sat around the loch before Myles finally arrived to collect us.

After loading the mini bus, we were driven to Genuig Inn where we met Sam one of the other co-facilitator for the Sirius Programme. Once the group has settled in to the accommodation we had lunch.

In the afternoon prior to going for walk, Myles and Sam questioned us to what we wanted to get out of the Sirius Environmental Leadership Programme. On return from our beautiful walk, we all gather in one of the Inn's room to discuss one of many activities we had to do prior to coming on the wilderness programme. We explored 'The River of Life Exercise'.

The concept of 'The River of Life Exercise' was to chart your life on a large (flipchart size) page. Use a 'river of life' that reflects your life path: the flow or movement of your life and your way of feeling and thinking about it. Identify turning points, important influences: people (friends, parents, mentors, authors, artists etc.), experiences (losses, crises, successes, creative times, helps, hindrances, spiritual influences and experiences, dreams that came true or did not materialise et.), education (books, plays, movies, lectures etc.) – anything you recall as something that you think is important enough to include in your river of life. (When thinking about something it is very important to keep asking: Why do I think It is Important?)

Everyone had different life experiences and it was interesting to hear what trigger different phrases in their life. We had fifteen minutes to deliver our presentation – pressure but I delivered in the exact timescale, much to Myles's delight!

Shortly, we settled down for dinner in the dining room. The food was absolutely delicious, fresh Scottish seafood which many of my fellow participants were keen to sample!

Later in the evening, it was time to start on focusing and preparing for tomorrow as we embark on the start of wilderness experience. First of all, we had to sort all the food out into different bags i.e. breakfast, lunch and dinner as these bags were going to be transported in barrows on our canoes.

We were also sorted with our kit of waterproof bag and lifejacket so the rest of the evening spent sorting our luggage into this waterproof bag and it was a time consuming task as I brought so much of my expedition gears.

The apprehension started to kick in about the coming days as I was the only sole disabled participant to join four able bodies on this programme and the only disabled person to take part in the Sirius Programme to-date. As much of our venture was going to be on the water, my deafness was going to be problematic as when undertaking water sports of any kinds, I have to take my hearing aids out to keep them dry.

When I was speaking to Ben about the days that lied ahead of us, he was willing to be my canoe's buddy as we were doing it in two per a canoe. This was going to be a challenge for both of us as I rely on lip-reading most of the time when I have my hearing aids out etc and with Ben who haven't come across many disabled people, he admittedly felt naive about disability however we knew immediately we would cope and given that I am adept to undertaking challenges, the process would become easier for Ben.

To give you an overview about Ben, he comes from London and works for a sustainability charity having study for a Master in Environmental Sustainability, prior to that he studied architecture but lost interest in the subject while in third year at University and has been on Raleigh International.

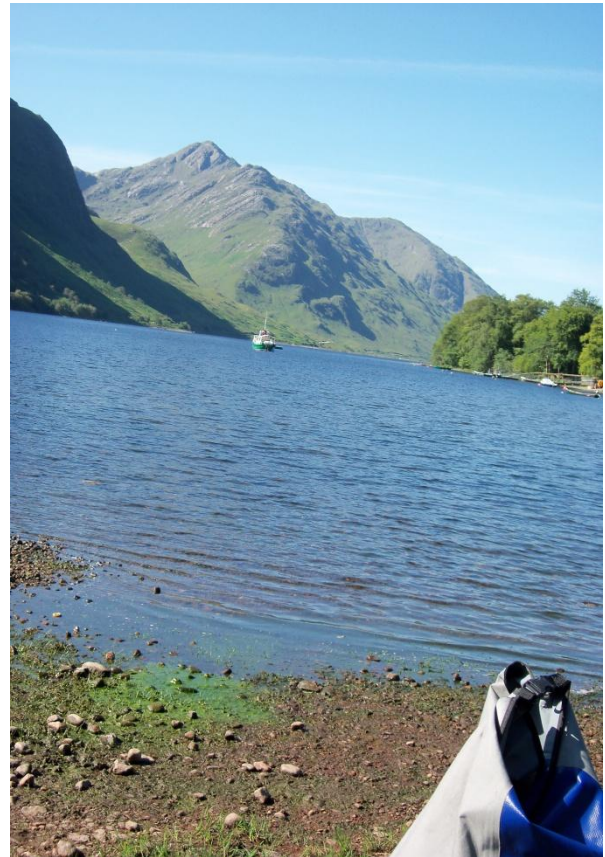
I was in bed just before midnight.

Sunday 24th July

We were awoken to a stunning morning in the Scottish's sunshine – I knew we were off to a great start!

After a much needed breakfast, we loaded the mini bus with all the bags, barrows and canoes and departed for Glenfinnan where Loch Shiel starts.

Loch Shiel (Scottish Gaelic: Loch Seile) is a 19.3 km² freshwater loch, 120 m deep, situated 20 km west of Fort William in Lochaber, Highland, Scotland. Its nature changes considerably along its length, being deep and enclosed by mountains in the north east and shallow surrounded by bog and rough pasture in the south west, from which end the 4 km River Shiel drains to the sea in Loch Moidart near Castle Tioram. The surrounding mountains are picturesque, and the area is well wooded compared to the many Highland areas that have suffered from overgrazing. Much of the shore is designated a Conservation Area. Uniquely for a major loch, the flow is not regulated. Loch Shiel is only marginally above sea level and was in fact a sea loch a few thousand years ago when sea levels (relative to Scotland) were higher. We aim to travel down the River Shiel and into Loch Moidart (a sea loch).



View of Loch Shiel

Once we had unloaded the minibus and waited for Sam and Richard to go and park the minibus at the other end of the loch, Myles started to work with us, firstly showed us how to pack our canoe with our kit and to keep it intact in the eventuality of a canoe capsizing.

It was time to get into our canoe with our buddy and have a practice session so I removed my hearing aids. I was immediately confronted by the fear of isolation as I couldn't hear and will emphasised that deafness is a hidden disability as much as it is a isolating problem. Perhaps also a frustrating one too because hearing is vital for communication in a team. Anyway, Ben and I went ahead with the seating arrangement in the canoe and hoped for the best that this was the right solution.

When we were out practising on our canoes, Myles kept asking if I understood that everything was being said and the sad reality was 'No and struggling to master my canoeing technique'. Myles suggested I put my hearing aids back in and wear them for the duration of the exploit. All thoughts were going through my head 'What if.....they break, get wet, and capsize or other miscellaneous circumstances that would cause my hearing aids not to work, I wouldn't have a spare'. However, I finally began to accept the situation and my gut instinct was slowly beginning to build-up confidence with Myles that probability of my canoe capsizing was pretty low. Its takes a lot of courage and faith in an experienced outdoor recreation leader while at the same time I was taking calculating risk with my hearing aids and hoped for the best!!

While we were canoeing in the loch, I was facing my personal difficulties of being able to sit on a wooden stool and canoe at the same time. It was extremely hard work for Ben and I, also given that I have muscle imbalance on the left side of my body as a result of my Cerebral Palsy, I was beginning to feel the effect of my muscles functioning and having to use more efforts. We were going to have to get used to paddling long distances in the coming days and I began contemplating whether I could actually do this water challenge. I was mixed emotion and Myles spoke to me and we discussed the issues I was facing and we reflected on what I had achieved in the past, Myles told me **'He knows that I can do this challenge but I am going to have to draw on my resilience'** to complete this challenge.

After sorting out the seating arrangement again with Ben and I, with me sitting at the front and Ben at the back, we canoed back up the Loch to wait for Sam and Richard to arrive back.

Our wilderness experience was ready to begin at last when Richard and Sam arrived back so we jumped back in our canoe and began to canoe down to our campsite where we had lunch. While paddling, I was still struggling to sit on that wooden stool so I did my utmost to paddle while trying to keep my co-ordination in check.

We finally arrived at our first of many campsites for lunch and within the campsite area was a salmon fishing farm. For the duration of our trip, it was going to consist of vegetarian options, very healthy diet!

During our lunch conversation, we discussed whether we should be eating livestock such as fish and meat etc, it was very mixed opinions but it embraced me to start taking a look at the food we consume in relation to the environment.

By mid afternoon, it was time to pack up and head for our final destination for the night, it was only a few kilometres away and at this point the wind started to pick up which in turn making my personal difficulties more difficult to manage and I just thought I can't afford to go on and Myles reminded me what the mission was about and he would look at my seating position when we get to camp.

When we finally reached our base camp for the night, we were given some solo-time to go away and reflect on today's journey, explore the wild etc. Myles and Sam kindly agreed to cook dinner and set up tents. (This was to be our first night sleeping in tents.)

Finally, when dinner was called, we were treated to mushroom risotto which was really tasty. After tidying up, we gathered in the communal tent to discuss everyone's thoughts that they had experienced during their solo time, there were some moving stories to be told and how the wilderness helps with personal situations.

I staggered off to bed about 2300 hours after a long tiring day, another day await Ben and I to see what challenge will be faced upon us.

Monday 25th July

Another perfect day drawn upon us, I woke up early thanks to Lisa's wakeup call when in actual fact it was only 0630 hours!! However, I didn't mind as sun and scenery on the loch was just like living on an idyllic island!

After a good bowl of porridge, Myles and I started to work on the wooden stool on my canoe that been given me problems since yesterday. While I have good core stability in my trunk movement when sitting still on dry land, the challenge was trying to hold myself upright in a canoe and paddling at the same time was making this challenge for me more difficult. Myles alleviated my fears and concerns as he mentioned he has worked with all types of disabilities. One product that Myles explained to me was a chair designed to strapped paraplegic people in the canoe safely however this chair wouldn't be suitable for me as I do have the core strength to an extent to keep me up so my needs are merely different.

We were provided with folding beach chair so Myles and I worked on that would be the solution to keep me upright when I was canoeing. We secured my folding beach chair to the wooden stool and ensured that I was sitting safely and secured, and I immediately began to realise this was a winning solution. You can never underestimate Myles's wealth of expertise – it certainly gave me a fascinating insight to the practicalities on how solutions can be sought. This area certainly got my mind going to how I could contribute to making the wilderness experience more accessible in the future.



My folding beach chair

After packing up the campsite and loading everything back onto our canoe, it was time for more reflection of the wilderness and the thoughts of today's adventure that awaits us. While we were scattered along the beach, I began reflecting on I hope that I would be able to assist Ben with the canoeing in comparison yesterday. I was feeling frustrated because I had to contend with so many personal challenges and I felt at times, I wasn't contributing my efforts to paddling so I only hoped that this day would be a much better day.

Sam helped Ben and I settle into our canoe and it was also lighter because they had taken some of our kits on the other people canoe and it would allow Ben and I to paddle faster down the loch. We travelled 7km down the loch today. No words can actually describe how much happier I was feeling today, I was able to paddle much better and the water was still and calm which made the canoeing experience much more pleasant.

We stopped for lunch half way into our 7km journey to our next campsite. The weather was scorching hot and when paddling through the water, you don't actually realize how strong the sun index is so we had to keep covered or put on sun-cream.

I must confess at this point, I was finding the canoeing rather more challenging than my previous challenges I had done in the past. It is probably more of a mental challenge and the co-ordination efforts required to do canoeing however, I was able to draw on my previous experiences to coping with this challenge.

Also, I knew I also had a safe pair of hand from Ben, his assistance and support was first-class, able to help me when I was struggling to get off my canoe but I was well aware that this was a learning curve for Ben. I wanted to be independent as much as possible but there were times I need a helping hand.

After another healthy lunch, we headed down the loch to our campsite for night. Seriously, it wasn't that far away from where stopped for lunch but the landscape along the way was changing all the time. I felt if I was in Austria!

Our campsite for night brought back a snapshot of the area that I was in the Amazon a few years ago as it felt exactly the same terrain for camping so I was in my home comfort. After unloading the canoes once again and helped set-up tents, we were given some solo-time do whatever we wanted i.e. explore the wilderness, swim in the loch or just chill.

While I was sorting out my bag, Lisa, my tent mate and I had a lengthy conversation about various things and what was the common denominator for both of us is that we are both twins. Her twin sister is studying Medicine while Lisa is studying Geography.

One of the most irritating aspects of coping with the wilderness was the amount of midges that were annoying us so we had to use our last resort of our midges net to keep our head covered.

It was time to prepare dinner which Ben and Hannah had volunteered to do which was vegetable with stuffed pasta then we had ginger cake with custard. The taste was amazing and we all developed a passion for outdoor cooking.

When we tidied up the cooking equipments, we moved into the communal tent for night where Sam took charge of the discussion. He wanted us to draw or mind map our vision of what the wilderness experience has done to us now and how it will shape us when we go back home. I found this task quite challenging. It really got us thinking to how we would do things differently in terms of reducing carbon footprints, climate change, organic food, outdoor learning and many other environmental factors.



Ben and Hannah cooking dinner

It was before midnight we got bed.

Tuesday 26th July

We woke up to another day of glorious sunshine and I was feeling confident as ever with Ben. We were raring to go! When we gathered out in the loch, Myles told us we would be St Finnan's Isle and Gaskan where Mike Tomkies wrote the book 'A Last Wild Place'.

As I started canoeing with Ben after a great day yesterday, I knew my folding beach chair wasn't sitting right so Myles would have a look at it when we reached Gaskan isle. This small island is situated in Loch Shiel.

We arrived at the Gaskan isle where Mike Tomkies wrote the book 'A Last Wild Place'. Myles and Ben were on hand in case I needed any assistance but thanks goodness I had my walking poles with me to cope with the uneven terrain and we had to cross a wooden bridge with a thin rope to hold onto.

Looking at the place, I don't think I could live on the isle for anymore than a few days but the wilderness experience that Mike Tomkies lived gave us a better understanding how to survive through the wilderness conditions.

Sam brought our canoe (Ben and I) around to other side of the isle to save time for me in walking back up the steep hill! The support and assistance from Sam and Myles was second to none. While the rest of group walked back to get their canoe, Ben and I headed down to collect our canoe, we managed to fix my folding beach chair and it was only to be a temporary measure until we canoed across to another rock island where we had lunch.

Before leaving to canoe down the loch to our campsite, Sam checked my folding beach chair and tightened the strapped. As Ben and I started to make progress down the loch, the wind was picking up and could see proper "white horse" waves immediately which brought additional challenges for Ben and I to deal with, not too forget my folding beach chair still wasn't fitting right! Since the wind was so strong we all see had to seek shelter near the shoreline as the canoeing was proving challenging for everyone. It was when Ben and I got to shelter, our canoe slipped as we apparently bumped into rocks which caused us to lose control when manoeuvring the canoe out of the rocks! I just about fell in with my jacket getting wet! Myles and Sam had a look at my folding beach chair and made some adjustments to it.

It was back in the canoe for Ben and I and we paddled a few kilometres along shoreline. The wind was becoming stronger to canoe through the water and even still my folding beach chair still wasn't quite right so when we sought shelter again, Myles and Sam looked at my folding beach chair. On reaching the sheltered rocks, Ben slipped while getting out of the canoe causing the canoe to slip over with me trying to remain upright!

I honestly say this wasn't best day for Ben and I as it was proving more challenging than anticipated. Myles and Sam agreed that my folding beach chair was becoming loose as I manage to keep myself in the one position along with the sheer force of the wind, it was becoming harder to maintain at times. Therefore the solution for the time being was to be tied up to Myles's canoe and Ben and Myles would do the canoeing while I sat tight.

We finally reached our potential destination for the night but Myles gave us three options to consider: we wait until the winds died down and we push onto our actual campsite for the night which was only a few hundred metres away, if we did this, our journey tomorrow will be more enjoyable and shorter or we camp up in the hills above the shoreline just around the corner, or if the wind continued to get stronger, we would tie all five canoes together like a ship and sail back to the campsite where we slept and it would take an hour to turn back.

It was agreed, we would wait for the wind to die down and proceed to our intended campsite for night and during that time we had to think about our five minutes project pitch for the night. Meanwhile, Myles suggested that we toll our canoe to another potential campsite so I sat in Sam's canoe and Myles toll me along the rocky shoreline as the terrain was uneven for me to walk on. The water was rough – enough for the water to splash on me!

When the wind died down, it was time to head our intended campsite which was on cow patch land surrounded by cows! The wind was still relatively strong when Ben and I were canoeing through it but we made it to our destination for the night!

After setting up camp, it wasn't long till dinner was made which consisted of vegetable and noodles along with walnut cake and custard.

Prior to coming on the Sirius Leadership Outdoor Programme, we also had to think of an environmental project idea. The purpose of the project idea was to help develop informed leaders for the future who understand, and believe in, the need to find balance between the needs of humans and nature in order to ensure a sustainable future for ourselves and the planet.

For many, it is enough just to understand and to find intellectual solutions to problems. For Sirius it is important to not only understand, but to feel , make connections, and take action. We link the head, heart and hand of the scholar to empower them to go back home and make a difference, using the new ideas and emotions they have experienced.

Everyone presented good environmental projects that they wish to implement following the Sirius Programme.....watch this space!

Wednesday 27th July

The Sirius Programme was nearly drawing to a close today, yet we woke up to another sunny day! We have been exceptionally lucky to have great weather for the duration of our experience which makes it more pleasant and far more enjoyable. Myles commented that this programme has been the best yet because the weather has been kind to us!

After our final check-in for breakfast, we loaded the canoes and headed to the end of our finishing point which was Dalilea Pier. Sam, sorted out my folding beach chair and I was happy to report that I was able to sit better in it in comparison to yesterday. Perhaps the strong weather had something to do with it!

On the way, the water was much calmer and thanks goodness Ben and I were able to do some decent canoeing after yesterday hiccups that threw upon us. We stopped at one island, St Finnan's Isle. The history of St Finnan's Isle was a great evangelizer of the area of West Lochaber and all around Loch Shiel, though there are many places in Scotland that bear his name. St Finnan's Isle on Loch Shiel - the Green Isle - maybe the most famous and is certainly the most important: the oldest existing church in the diocese of Argyll & the Isles.

After an early lunch, we departed to make the most of the last few kilometers that we had left to cover. Clearly, Ben and I were taking our time as the water was remarkably calm and there was no way we would encounter hitches along the way, we wanted to enjoy the peaceful surrounding in the stunning landscape that Loch Shiel has to offer.

Ben and I finally reached the end of our destination at Dalilea Pier, where we overcame adversity during our five days of our wilderness experience. I am so grateful for Ben agreeing to be my canoeing buddy as it was very much a journey of all sorts for both of us: we learned, we laughed, shared knowledge, reflected on personal contribution to the wild and other path routes that this wilderness experience may present to us.

After we loaded the canoes and luggage onto the minibus, we made our journey back to Fort William where we were taken to Glen Nevis Youth Hostel which was along from Ben Nevis.



Ben and Julie @ Dalilea Pier

When we arrived at the hostel, the weather was scorching and full of climbers who have just climbed Ben Nevis. We unpacked our waterproof bags to put back into our travel bags. Finally, we were able to have a much needed shower as it was hot and sticky and freshen up after our venture in wilderness places.

Later that evening after having dinner in the hostel, we all gathered in the hostel's common room to final close the Sirius Programme. I was still lost for words to how to sum-up this amazing programme. We took a walk down to the Ben Nevis stream and carried on with our reflection period and Myles wanted to give us a token marble to refer to this when embarking on taking our ideas forward.

Lastly, we went off to the pub to celebrate the closure of the Sirius Programme, it has been fantastic to have shared this wilderness experience with fellow participants who share same passion, interests, intellect etc – I couldn't have asked for a better bunch of people to share my personal challenge with.

Thursday 28th July

After a good night out the night before, reliving the tales of the wilderness of Scotland had to offer, we left Fort William Youth Hostel to be driven to Fort William train station for our journey home where we bid our farewell to Myles and Sam.

Our train wasn't due to leave Fort William until 1140 hours so I stayed with Richard to look after the bags while some of them went into Fort William to buy Scottish souvenirs.

The train left on time and scenery on the way down was completely different in comparison to when we came up. The Scottish weather took a turn for the worst so we were extremely lucky to have had basking hot weather while it lasted.

We finally arrived at Glasgow Queen Street 1530 hours where we said our farewell again as the rest of the participants were heading to Glasgow Central to catch the train to London and South Wales when they would finally arrive home around 2300 hours.

When I arrived home, I was still struggling to find words that sum up this awesome experience. I feel this wilderness experience has once again changed my perspective on me as a person joining four able bodies on this canoeing exploits and that is something I will never forget.

Transcript of the emails between Julie and Ben:

Email to Ben from Julie:

Dear Ben

How are you? How are you feeling now that our exploits has come to an end?

I am just about fully recovered and can put my brain into gear and compose a sincere thank you email for you.

While my thoughts are scattered on clouds from this wilderness expedition, I feel this trip has once again change my prescriptive on me as person joining four able bodies on this canoeing exploits and it is something I will never forget in hurray. I will send the log in due course as you are due credit in my wilderness experience.

I just wanted to say 'Thankyou', without your constant encouragement and support I may never have experienced this wonderful feeling of achievement of completing this arduous challenge on my scale. I really appreciate all the care and protection you gave me throughout our journey down the Loch. We both succeeded through the challenges that the water presented to us.

We were also blessed with gracious Scottish weather during our wilderness programme which helped enormously with the gorgeous scenery Scotland has to offer. I felt if I was in a different country at times!

I hope you have enjoyed the wilderness in Scotland as much as I have had enjoyed having you as my canoe's buddy.

Juliex

Email from Ben to Julie

Dear Julie,

Great to hear from you so soon and thank you so much for writing, I am truly touched. It was an absolute pleasure being your buddy for the week and I think we should all be so proud with our achievements. I had the most amazing weeks 'holiday' but also a very important personal journey. Loch Shiel was genuinely the most beautiful place I have ever been to and I couldn't have chosen 7 more friendly, interesting and down-to-earth people to share it with. As you say, it will take a few days or weeks to come down from the high and reflect on our achievement and learning but it's sure to live on in my memory forever.

However, as I tried to say on Wednesday evening, my most profound learning experience and favourite memories were working with you. Above all, you are such a bubbly, upbeat character to have in the team and I will miss your laugh and fantastic sense of humour! Furthermore, you have taught me so much about people with disabilities, dispelling my naivety and prejudices from very little previous interaction. You are a true inspiration Julie and have inspired me to find ways of helping other suffers of disabilities overcome their physical barriers and achieve their dreams. For that, I am truly thankful.

I would love to explore Glasgow more in the future and discussed with the others a reunion in January at the folk festival Miles and Sam talked of - so whether it's on your next visit to London or up in Scotland, I look forward to seeing you again very soon.

Please keep in touch with your challenges, projects and movements.

With best wishes,

Ben x

Conclusion

I am still trying to master my thoughts and experiences that this wilderness experience has given me. It has undoubtedly changed me as a person for the better but I am still trying to assess the skills and attributes that this experience has given me to allow me to take forward and use them in other life skills situations. (I can see in the distance the scopes that I could unleash as a result of this programme as well as working on my project's idea.)

This experience would not have been a success without the support of my seven team members. We both all shared same passion for one thing – wilderness and environment. We also bonded well, yet once again it a gut instinct, you know that you are going to get on well with them.

I would like to pay tribute to Ben – our time on this Sirius Programme presented formidable challenges for both us, not only for me having to cope with my difficulties that my disability presented to me during the course of the programme but also Ben handling situations which he isn't familiar with but Ben quickly learned the reins. It was immediate that I had trust in him to be my canoe's buddy, his shiny personality, sense of humour – very similar to mine, considerate and protective of others.

There were times throughout the programme, I felt a little frustrated with my disability and tasks that everyone else took for granted is slower for me to do however everyone was willing to help if I needed assistance and for that I am indebted for their assistance.

We couldn't have asked for better guides of the like of Myles and Sam as they have been instrumental to founding and growing the Sirius programme. Their knowledge and expertise was impeccable. It was a privileged to have had the opportunity to work with two most respected guides who know all about the wilderness of Scotland and concepts of outdoor learning. I truly believed that Myles and Sam have opened my capability of understanding about the wilderness better and given me the catalyst to pursue my project's idea but also underpin other areas to investigate and explore too.

Finally, I would like to say 'Thankyou' to the Wilderness Foundation UK for giving me this ground breaking opportunity.