



DARA MCANULTY

AGE: 14 years old FROM: Northern Ireland

TOP FIVE CHARACTER VALUES: RESILIENCE, PERSEVERANCE & DETERMINATION | COMPASSION | LEADERSHIP | HOPE / OPTIMISM | COMMUNICATION

“As a young person on the autistic spectrum I find nature and wildlife very therapeutic but it needs our help. Through my social actions I hope to connect more young people to nature, so they can learn, grow and feel the difference it makes to our mental health!”

I first got involved in social action when I realised how therapeutic nature and wildlife are in easing my anxiety, social isolation and sensory issues as a young person on the autistic spectrum. When I discovered that our wildlife is declining I started writing my online blog which raises awareness and connects people who are socially isolated with nature. I am proud that people have told me that my words give hope and positivity to others.

I also speak at events on ways to engage young people with nature, including for The British Ecological Society and Eco Schools. I also sit on the Grassroots Challenge Youth Forum, fundraise for local wildlife organisations, and spend lots of my time connecting other young people to the natural world - through activities such as bat walks, birdwatching and wildlife awareness stands in schools. I wrote articles for The Wildlife Watch and Ulster Wildlife on how necessary nature is for a healthy young population of advocates who care for and want to protect our natural world.

I have tackled plastic consumption at my school and organised an eco-group, which built bird/bat boxes and a wildlife pond. Taking part in social action has also benefited the local environment by raising £6,000 to satellite tag birds of prey. I raised this money though Just Giving whilst enduring a 30-mile hike in January this year. This is creating a

community action project for others to appreciate the birds and to also combat crimes against wildlife. It will be launched very soon!

I showcase local areas for their beauty, local people doing good work, local environmental campaigns and projects. Being autistic can make the world overwhelming and confusing, but through all my social action, my life has vastly improved. My passion is connecting young people to nature, so they can learn, grow and feel the difference it makes to our mental health.

I have collaborated with other young people to pursue taking part in social action through making videos about raising awareness of our wildlife and other shared experiences as part of the Grassroots Challenge programme.

I am committed to ensuring that local politicians and organisations give precedence to the connection between nature, youth and mental health.

