

# YOUNG PEOPLE ACT: --- NATURE/ CLIMATE

IN WHAT  
WAYS DO  
YOUNG PEOPLE  
TAKE ACTION FOR  
NATURE AND  
CLIMATE?

HOW CAN  
YOUTH AND  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
GROUPS WORK  
TOGETHER?

WHAT  
DOES BETTER  
EQUALITY AND  
REPRESENTATION  
LOOK LIKE IN  
PRACTICE?



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2023

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## WHO SHOULD READ THIS?

- **You are part of a youth group** or organisation and are motivated to get involved in nature or climate projects, locally or internationally.
- **You are part of an environmental group** or organisation, and you are keen to work collaboratively and ethically with young people.
- **You work in a school context** and want to know more about what is happening outside of educational settings.

## WHY READ THIS?

- **You want to find out more about a range of projects**, how they run, what they do well and how challenges have been tackled.
- **You are committed to taking action** to improve the diversity of those involved, by meaningfully engaging with the hopes, skills and motivations of young people from a wide range of contexts and backgrounds.

## WHAT IS IN THIS RESOURCE?

- We set out **two key challenges** faced by young people who are involved in nature and climate action in the UK.
- We introduce **different types of action** for nature engagement and climate activism.
- We discuss **five themes** which our research highlighted as important in a wide range of contexts and types of action. For each we look specifically at what supports equality of access and representation.
- We go back to the two key challenges with priorities and recommendations: **“Do this!”**

The projects highlighted in this resource mostly take place outside of school contexts. The term ‘young people’ is used to include teenagers and young adults, from 12 to 25 years of age.

There are many environmental issues, international and local, that young people feel are important: biodiversity loss, climate change, littering, lack of access to local nature spaces and the need to plant more trees. Young people in the UK face several challenges when it comes to making a positive difference on environmental issues. Here are two key challenges that we focus on in this resource:

## CHALLENGE ONE:

Activism is hard, and there are fewer ways to make a positive difference for young people.

- In the UK, young people's opinions and ideas are often not heard on important issues, including the environment.
- Sectors which support young people, such as youth work, are long-term under-resourced.
- Young people have complex everyday lives with multiple pressures. Their lives are also shaped by inequalities experienced by their families and communities.
- The challenge of climate change can feel overwhelming for young people leading to eco-anxiety or disconnection, and this can lower motivation for getting involved.

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## CHALLENGE TWO:

The lack of diverse representation in the environmental sector is common knowledge, and the response to this is often tokenistic.

- There can be a number of reasons why young people are not included or don't take part in environmental actions because of their race, culture, gender, and experiences of poverty, disability or care responsibilities. These reasons affect their ability to get involved and to make the most of opportunities.
- In terms of race and ethnicity, the environmental sector is one of the least diverse in the UK, and so there is a lack of role models across different types of jobs and positions.
- Common ways to involve young people can often be well-meant but tokenistic. One-off events such as tree planting, or being asked to take part in a consultation, are first steps but often don't lead to further input. Skills development is rarely offered, and there are few paid opportunities.

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# WHAT WE DID

Our research focused on 'what can go right'.

What happens when young people are motivated and able to contribute to taking action for nature and climate?

How are the above challenges being addressed by different types of groups and organisations in various ways and using a range of strategies appropriate to their context?

We searched out examples of innovation and youth leadership from across the UK from place-based conservation to national climate change advocacy.

We looked for 'innovation' in three areas.

Projects where there was a clear ongoing commitment to recruiting and sustaining involvement of a diverse group of young people. This could mean taking careful steps to engage individuals and groups who have historically been less involved in a particular type of project.

Projects that connected social and environmental action.

Projects where growing youth leadership was important.

Our research involved interviews with group leaders and members from 24 organisations, and participation in a range of activities with young people. A full list is given at the end of this resource.

# OVERVIEW OF THE FIVE THEMES

We have organised our findings into five key themes.

- 1 Growing through acting
- 2 Care in collective action
- 3 Connecting local and global
- 4 Moving past tokenism
- 5 Social and environmental justice

- These themes can be relevant for people of all ages who take action on nature and climate, but we found that young people often gave them a high priority.
- So for environmental organisations wanting to collaborate with young people, these themes are important to consider. Many projects in this resource show leadership and provide examples of the impact of these.
- Addressing discrimination in the environmental sector and working towards equality of access and representation are vital in work with young people. We found good practice and meaningful approaches across all themes, and include ideas and approaches for everyone looking to do better on these issues.
- The final pages of this report set out some clear overall priorities. **"Do This"!**

# DIFFERENT WAYS IN WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE TAKE ACTION FOR NATURE AND CLIMATE

## YOUTH ADVISORY BOARDS

Forum for priority setting / provide a youth perspective / lead projects and manage budgets

## RANGER PROGRAMMES

Skills training for environmental management / time in nature for wellbeing / learning about local ecology

## NATURE ENGAGEMENT IN A LOCAL PLACE

Time in nature for wellbeing / growing projects / learning about local ecology

## CAMPAIGNING AND PROTEST NETWORKS ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Policy input to government / awareness raising / on street protests and school strikes

## GAINING TRAINING TO RUN PROJECTS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Accredited structured programmes / taught content and mentorship / participants identify and deliver projects / focused on campaigning or place-based change

## TAKING PART IN ECOLOGICAL SCIENCE PROJECTS

Citizen science projects / long-term land management with other stakeholders / improving biodiversity and climate resilience of a local setting

## NATURE THEMED CAMPS

Residential retreat in rural settings / have fun outdoors / learn about nature / focus on wellbeing and personal development

# GROWING THROUGH ACTING

## KEY POINTS

- Young people and adult facilitators often express pride about their groups' achievements, whether short or long term, tangible or intangible, and how group members exceed their own expectations.
- The ability of young people to make choices and set their own direction is strongly connected to enthusiasm, and increased enthusiasm leads to a drive to keep going.
- Reflecting on progress is an important part of every group. It can be helpful for this to be supported by adults with more experience of the sector.

## FOCUS ON EQUALITY

- Involvement with these projects can build competencies that young people can use in the future, and which go beyond what they do in school.
- Young people highly value engaging with adults with specific expertise or leadership experience in the environmental sector and appreciate being treated with mutual respect. Support for networking is extremely helpful in highlighting possibilities to enter the sector, especially for young adults without previous connections beyond their local area.
- Offering a range of types of action - both creating immediate impacts and working towards long term change - can be useful for young people to explore different approaches of environmental work. Allowing a choice of focus can be important in increasing motivation, self-direction and achievement.

**"The amount of learning you get in the time is incredible, and it's everything; personal, group learning, industry learning. Also being around people who are like-minded and aiming for the same things. Speaking to people in power as well as grassroots organizations, and having that personal mentoring tied together quite nicely. Had it not been for this program, I wouldn't have gone into the environment sector."**

**PARTICIPANT, ENVIRONMENTAL TRAINING PROGRAMME**



# CARE IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

## KEY POINTS

- Care for each other shapes the way young people work across a wide range of settings.
- Acting in a group context rather than individually is highly valued as a supportive, friendly and enabling way of making a difference and reducing eco-anxiety.
- Emotions play a role in caring. Groups use a wide range of techniques to support each other, including 'checking in' before meetings, spending time in nature and keeping connections going through Whatsapp groups.
- Groups take time over decision-making and completing actions to ensure everyone is included and it is manageable for everybody.

**"The group is quite supportive when it comes to burnout. If someone says I'm not coming to the meeting this weekend, too tired, no one turns around and says, 'you need to come', or 'we are dependent on you.'"**

**MEMBER,  
CLIMATE PROTEST GROUP**

## FOCUS ON EQUALITY

- Care for each other is often expressed as understanding of other's complex and challenging life situations.
- Groups entirely self-organised by young people often work to avoid a hierarchical leadership structure, instead they carefully and intentionally share decision making. This may involve older members taking supportive and enabling roles to ensure younger members are included in a fair and equal way.
- Facilitators and connected adults need to be practically caring and careful about expectations; including cost, ability to travel, scheduling and willingness to sit in long meetings.
- A mix of online and offline meetings is useful for many groups in enabling diversity of participation when participants don't live close to each other.
- Opportunities for groups to occasionally spend time together in nature (rural, coastal, urban parks) are precious for both relaxing and socialising. Not all young people have these opportunities as an everyday option.



# CONNECTING LOCAL AND GLOBAL

## KEY POINTS

- Global solidarity is important to many young people.
- Storytelling is a powerful mode of connection and communication across places and communities that is important to young people, with many having advanced storytelling skills and methods.
- Many young people find it meaningful to link nature, social and climate dimensions of environmental action. The statement 'think global, act local' is often simply not accurate in reflecting either environmental realities or family and community connections.

## FOCUS ON EQUALITY

- Connecting the global and local is meaningful and intuitive for many young people today, especially those whose families and communities have heritage in and ongoing connections with other countries. Young people have lots of knowledge to offer in this area.
- Projects which involve a mix of participants from different ethnic and family migration backgrounds are generally strongest in embedding a global climate justice perspective into their activities.
- Young people are open to and excited by making global connections and are generous in sharing platforms and including less-heard stories. One example was a UK youth campaign group using their session at an international conference to enable young people from the Philippines to talk about their experiences of climate change.

"This work inspired me to learn about these new things. It was relatable to me because work in the garden reminded me of my childhood, my home. My grandparents live in Poland. They farm, on their balcony and land to grow crops. I usually go to Poland every summer for a month and spend time with my grandparents and family."

**MEMBER, COMMUNITY GARDEN PROJECT**





# MOVING PAST TOKENISM

## KEY POINTS

- Many projects are initially set up because environment groups (often large national charities) want to connect with young people. The relationships between young people's action within existing structures can have complex dynamics, sometimes including being patronised or stereotyped.
- Many young people have experience of being 'consulted' but no action being taken, or of being included just for a photo opportunity.
- Young people don't want to be stereotyped by mainstream media and the environmental sector as 'the future hope'. While hope is an important aspect of young people's motivation, the value of their contribution is in the present.
- There needs to be flexibility about formats of working. Many young people do not want to conform within establishment settings such as long meetings or conferences. They can feel like it's not a good use of their time.
- When a young person's project sits within a larger environmental charity, non-tokenistic and respectful experiences are more likely to happen when young people are holding the strategic direction, supported by facilitation from the organisation. Skilled facilitators build trust by balancing giving appropriate guidance and practical support, while increasing the power of the group to set their own priorities.

## FOCUS ON EQUALITY

- Developing skills and networks are important to many young people as they are of benefit to them as they move from education to employment. Tailoring these to group members specific circumstances can help address inequalities.
- Working towards diversity and equality within youth projects and organisations needs intentional, thoughtful, and sustained action, especially given the very non-diverse profile of the environmental sector.
- Actions that have been appropriate in different settings include providing activities for specific groups, not requiring membership before participation (e.g. for a position on a youth board), advertising through social media, building outreach through previously involved young people and collaborating with other campaigns and groups (e.g. LGBTQ+ groups, local schools).

**"Youth engagement with the main board did not happen as we imagined. Don't just use us as tokenistic advertising, involve us in decision making."**

**MEMBER,  
YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD**



# SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

## KEY POINTS

- Young people's experiences and circumstances are shaped by race, class, gender and (dis)abilities among other things. Many have personal experience of the increasingly poor state of local and global environments, and how this is linked to social discrimination and unjust structures of decision making and resource allocation.
- Many young people's groups are keen to move away from a narrative of individual responsibility for climate change and biodiversity loss to taking collective action and addressing structural causes.
- Social and environmental justice can be enacted at a local scale. Young people have a wide range of skills, interests and passions, and having a wide choice of actions can inspire a range of people to take part. Though very different, practical activities (such as litter picking) and activities such as campaigning can both be meaningful contributions.

## FOCUS ON EQUALITY

- In response to the diversity crisis in the environmental sector, there is a welcomed increase in funded training routes for young people. Additional positive outcomes from these programmes can include young people entering other careers with informed environmental perspectives.
- There is a long history of exclusion of people from minoritised ethnic communities within the environmental sector. Supporting minoritised young people to participate in this sector requires ongoing attention and care, especially where they remain under-represented.
- Young people can build on their knowledge and experiences of social and environmental issues in their own lived experience to inform their activism.

**“For COP26 we had people from Brazil and lots of small island states and gave them our accreditations so that they can have a voice in the negotiations as well. We have no say in what they do, just trust them. It’s the core of climate justice, if they are the ones most affected then it’s their voices that need to be heard. It’s not good for us to talk for them as we don’t know their lived experience.”**

**YOUTH LEADER,  
NATIONAL ACTIVIST NETWORK**



## CHALLENGE ONE:

Find meaningful ways to support the activism and actions of young people concerned about climate change and biodiversity loss.

- **Change the status quo.** Consider what the environmental sector can learn from the way young people organise themselves.
- **Use youth-work strategies and expertise** to meet young people where they are at (physically and mentally).
- **Resource young people.** Financial support is always great, but access to networks, help with logistics, and skills development are also deeply valued, and demonstrate commitment beyond tokenism
- **Share responsibility for young people's mental health** in this work and embed this in all projects. Whether through local park picnics or rural residentials, providing safe and fun times in nature can help individuals and the group.
- **Model the 'good-enough' activist.** Allow for progress rather than perfection. Expect and allow people to step back and move on when life circumstances require.

"Adults want young people to participate and do more but also do not provide us with the opportunity. There needs to be more conversation between young people and decision makers. We need to be a more integral part of the board meetings".

MEMBER, YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

## CHALLENGE TWO:

Achieve diversity of representation without tokenism

- **Do the leg-work.** Environmental organisations wanting to collaborate with young people need to be prepared to be present within young people's spaces (physical and digital) and take on their modes of working.
- **Address practicalities.** These are a vital and often limiting factor for young people. Work slowly and collaboratively to ensure everybody feels welcome and able to participate. This may mean physical access on site, times of meeting, financial or travel support, training for staff members or creating safe spaces with a focus on a specific group (for example, defined by gender, race or class).
- **Always connect** local and global, social and environmental justice. This is important for ensuring actions are relevant to young people's life experiences and gives space for their own stories to belong.
- **Find cross-sector collaborations.** Environmental organisations and youth organisations can do great things together and both grow in understanding and impact.

"You can't expect people to take up something they don't know about, that's never been targeted to them before, that they feel uncomfortable about, they feel isn't for them".

FACILITATOR, ACCESS TO NATURE ACTION GROUP

## RESEARCH PROCESS

- We interviewed leaders and facilitators from 24 organisations. Our interviews covered the history of these groups and projects, format and approaches they use to involve and support young people, successes and challenges.
- We then observed sessions and interviewed young people for four of these. We focused on young people's experience of being part of these projects, what they enjoy, how they work through ongoing challenges, their motivation for taking part and what encourages them.

## PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

Action for Conservation  
(UK wide)

Black2Nature (Bristol)

Bright Green Future (Bristol)

Cairngorms Youth Action  
Team

Field Studies Council (UK wide)

Global Generation (London)

Green Futures (Yorkshire  
Dales Millennium Trust)

Groundwork Greater  
Manchester

Learning through Landscapes  
(UK-wide)

Leeds Youth4Climate

Manchester Climate Change  
Youth Board

Natural History Consortium  
(South West England)

New Shoots (Chiltern AONB)

North Wales Wildlife Trust

ReRoute (Young Scot)

RSPB Youth Council (UK-wide)

Students for Trees (UK-wide)

The Green Team (Edinbungh)

UK Youth 4 Nature

UK Youth Climate Coalition

Ulster Wildlife

Uprising (UK-wide)

Wilderness Foundation (Essex)

Young Somerset

## PROJECT OVERVIEW AND TEAM CONTACTS

A big thank you to the participating organisations and the young people involved for the generosity of your time, ideas and reflections. We hope you enjoyed reading this!

This information in this resource is based on research conducted in the UK context by the Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Sheffield. It is one part of a longer project called 'Voices of the Future' which explores new methods of engaging young people in designing, creating and caring for treescapes, including natural woodlands and urban parks, and is led by Prof. Kate Pahl at Manchester Metropolitan University. This work was supported by the Natural Environment Research Council [NE/V021370/1].

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**IF YOU HAVE ANY  
QUESTIONS OR  
IDEAS TO SHARE  
PLEASE GET IN  
TOUCH.**

“Don’t just use us as tokenistic advertising,  
involve us in decision making.”

## MEMBER, YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

This booklet is full of information, insights and ideas about actions for climate and nature taken by young people. Based on research with 24 different groups across the UK, we challenge environmental organisations to learn from young people working together on climate and nature projects, and to involve them in meaningful ways.

We share ideas for youth groups wanting to get involved in environmental campaigns and the importance of connecting with social justice issues. Moving beyond tokenism, we suggest practical steps towards representation and inclusion to urgently improve the diversity of the environmental movement.



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