

Good to be Green: Why the environment matters to young people and how it can help you

July 2011

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Introduction

Our environment is where we live, work and play. So it shouldn't be surprising that there are huge benefits to getting young people to experience and connect with the environment. NCVYS has consulted with a number of national charities and organisations and has developed the following principles which we hope will inform our members work.

Principles

- Our organisation will recognise that connection with the natural environment brings diverse benefits for young people.
- Our organisation will provide an environment where young people can develop their well-being, self-confidence, a caring attitude and knowledge.
- Our organisation will create a healthy environment where young people are valued, included and involved.
- Our organisation will support environmental actions to help foster cooperative working, physical fitness and a sense of ownership or responsibility.
- Our organisation will do all it can to be environmentally-friendly.
- Our organisation will aim to ensure everyone's right to clean, safe and green spaces.

Why the Environment?

In November 2008 NCVYS's National Conference aimed to raise the profile of environmental youth work. The environment has become a popular way of engaging young people, with climate change in particular something that young people care passionately about. However, environmental work is often seen as worthy and distinct from working with or for people, and environmentalists are often painted as radical eco-warriors and doom-mongers, who care more about rainforests than their fellow humans. It is perhaps unsurprising that many organisations working with young people do not think consideration of the environment is an important part of what they do. Yet there is compelling and growing evidence that engagement with the environment can improve the work of those supporting young people, regardless of whether it is an 'environmental' group. The value of experiences with nature cannot be overstated; rekindling young people's interest in nature has enormous potential benefits.

The environment is part of everything we do; it is about our place, our surroundings. The quality of the environment where young people live, study and hang out in has a huge effect on their outlook, aspirations and self-confidence. Taking an interest and acting with regard to one's own environment also leads inexorably to an understanding of the connection between the personal, the local and global issues.

At the global level, our future economic well-being depends on environmental sustainability. This means living within our means, so that we can continue to live prosperously in the long-term. Engaging with the environment is vital – ensuring that we reduce the negative impact we are having on the environment and striving to make a positive one. Sustainability is also about living in a just society, a healthy environment is one in which everyone respects each other as well as the planet. It is important to recognise that young people need nature, and nature needs young people.

The voluntary and community sector for young people is in a perfect place to be the champion of positive, ethical work practices because such practices ought to naturally coincide with their values. This document aims to explain some of the reasons why the environment is something all organisations working with young people should be concerned about. It is hoped it will encourage the voluntary and community youth sector to engage with environmental issues and to institute an environmental policy.

Connecting young people's concerns with the environment

The environment is deeply relevant to all organisations, and especially those working with young people. A large amount of recent work has highlighted the importance of the environment to diverse aspects of human life. It is impossible to tackle specific concerns of young people in isolation as it becomes increasingly clear that these issues are interwoven.

There are links between unchecked dirty streets and anti-social behaviour and serious crime. There is evidence that disconnection from the natural environment has an impact on young people's well-being. Green places can have hugely positive impacts on mental health. Yet today's young people seem to know less about natural history and spend less time playing outdoors than previous generations.

The environment is not just about climate change, dolphin-friendly tuna and recycling. The environment is about our neighbourhood – where we live, work and play. Young people want green spaces and play areas, less noise, pollution and litter. These are not only aesthetically pleasing, but have a positive impact on the local economy and on social conditions. Environmental education can be a powerful tool for urban and rural revitalisation owing to the interaction between environmental health, the ability to learn and human well-being.

Mental Health

There is growing and powerful evidence that contact with nature benefits mental health, and this can be especially powerful in the case of young people. Contact with nature can be an effective way of combating stress, low concentration and hyperactivity.¹ Studies suggest that green outdoor settings significantly reduce ADHD symptoms.² Similarly, preliminary work suggests that woodland can provide a sanctuary for children, who have reported reduced stress in these surroundings.

¹ *Natural Thinking*, RSPB (June 2007) http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/naturalthinking_tcm9-161856.pdf

² *A Potential Natural Treatment for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: Evidence From a National Study* American Journal of Public Health, FE Kuo, A Faber Taylor (2004) quoted in *Natural Thinking*

These reports have posited a number of theories which may link health to the natural environment. Biophilia suggests that we have an innate genetic affiliation to nature and that we therefore thrive in natural surroundings. Attention Restoration Theory (ART) has shown that increased contact with nature restores the brain from fatigue and reduces aggression and irritability. Psycho-physiological stress recovery theory explains the immediately positive response to nature shown by empirical findings.

Physical Health

Physical inactivity is a burden for society, and in young people it is contributing to a generation more likely to be overweight and unhealthy. Research by Natural England has found that the likelihood of a child visiting any green space at all has halved in a generation, and almost two-thirds of children played indoors at home more often than any other place.³ It is not surprising that natural green space can increase levels of physical activity – especially as a favourable environment for exercise and creating positive views around exercise. Activities which combine exercise and the environment appear to be more sustainable than exercise alone.

The right of children to play is ordained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁴ A review of natural play concluded that for young people playing in natural spaces has numerous benefits.⁵ These include: instilling a sense of wonder, stimulating creativity, supporting a child's sense of self and allowing them to recognise their independence alongside an understanding their interdependence with the ecological world.

Physical health is also intrinsically linked with food – knowledge of and interest in local food products leads to healthier and tastier food, and also means fewer food miles and less packaging.

Educational and social development

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that 'the education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for the natural environment' (Article 29.1e). There are direct educational benefits to young people of engagement with the environment– the widening of horizons and exposure to different surroundings; the development of social skills and language development; and the development of ecological consciousness.

Furthermore, overcoming challenging situations in the natural environment can contribute to the development of a positive self-image and confidence in one's ability to deal with uncertainty, as well as encouraging young people to take responsibility. Recent findings from a study involving young people on a wilderness programme of outdoor activities showed improvements in leadership, communication skills, confidence, problem-solving abilities and time management.⁶

There are also derivative effects on educational development from the environment's benefits for physical health (through the development of higher cognitive processes) and from the benefits for mental health and the improved functioning of the brain that follows from emotional well-being.

Community

American researchers have found that engagement with the natural environment and increased contact with the outdoors can strengthen the community.⁷ A strong community can be vital in efforts to tackle crime and poverty and for tackling anti-social behaviour among young people. Communities in close proximity to pollution, and lacking good quality green space, access to public transport or shops selling fresh food, are more likely to be economically deprived.⁸

³ *Transforming Education Outside the Classroom*, Children, Schools and Families Select Committee (March 2010) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/418/418.pdf>

⁴ Convention on the Rights of the Child <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>

⁵ *Play, naturally*, Play England (2006) <http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/130593/play-naturally.pdf>

⁶ *Wilderness therapy can prevent challenging behaviour*, CYPNow (September 2009)

<http://www.cypnow.co.uk/bulletins/Youth-Work-Weekly/news/936945/?DCMP=EMC-YouthWorkWeekly>

⁷ Kuo FE, Sullivan WC, Coley RL and Brunson L (1998) Fertile Ground for Community: Inner-City Neighbourhood Common Spaces. *Am J Comm Psychology* 26, 6, 1998 QUOTED IN NATURAL THINKING RSPB

⁸ <http://www.everyactioncounts.org.uk/guides/greenofficev1.pdf>

The natural environment is something that can be enjoyed by people from all ages and backgrounds so it can engage all elements of a community. The environment and a sense of place can also be an important part of defining one's identity and the creation of feelings of belonging and attachment. The natural environment is beneficial to social relationships by providing inclusive places to meet.

By reducing irritability and impulsive behaviour, the natural environment appears to help reduce aggressive behaviour, which is increasingly an issue for young people in the UK. This has important implications for those aiming to deal with criminal and violent behaviour. The natural environment may also be important for dealing with poverty as well as the anxiety and depression which often go along with it. Research has found that where natural vegetation surrounds poor housing, poor residents are better able to cope with stressful situations.⁹

Costs

Of course, along with the social and psychological benefits of considering the environment there are also economic ones. While some elements of environmental thinking may not initially seem to be cheap, significant savings can arise from cutting energy bills and waste. In the long term, an unsustainable approach will become increasingly expensive.

Recommendations

Governance and planning

- With young people, agree an environmental policy for the organisation.
- Identify environmental impacts, and implement a system of annual review and agree action on a national and local level.
- Promote environmental good practice, involving everyone, including volunteers, staff, members, funders, partners, customers, suppliers, landowners, and the communities in which you work.
- Make links with other organisations to share environmental knowledge.

Resources

- Reduce, Re-use, Re-cycle – aim for a minimal amount of waste to be sent to landfill. Set a measurable target for each of these areas and monitor regularly.
- Use resources wisely to be fair to present and future generations.
- When purchasing materials consider environmental impact as a key criterion, defined in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.
- Avoid pollution wherever possible.

Staff and Training

- Discuss environmental issues regularly at all management levels.
- Provide environmental training for staff, and encourage them to apply good environmental practice both at work and at home.
- Encourage staff to implement some simple and easy changes, which can still have a big impact on improving environmental performance, as well as cutting costs.

Energy

- Work towards reducing transport derived emissions by minimising the use of vehicles wherever possible and promoting the use of public transport.
- Minimise the use of water throughout your activities.
- Select suppliers that demonstrate the best standards of environmental performance.
- Purchase consumables made from recycled materials or with a high recycled content.
- Develop buildings with high standards of environmental performance.

Global view

- Contribute towards the protection and improvement of the global environment.
- Encourage activities and technology that benefits the environment.
- Consider the wealth of opportunities that working with nature provides.
- Celebrate our environmental heritage.
- Recognise the importance of wildlife to understand and interacting with nature.

⁹ Natural Thinking RSPB

How to write an Environmental Policy

Organisations are encouraged to develop the ideas suggested in the recommendations into their own environmental policy which informs their work. When drawing up this policy organisations may also want to consider the following suggestions:

- Widely distribute this policy, both internally and externally.
- Regularly review the policy, ideally once a year.
- Build the policy into an action plan with targets.
- All documents should be young person-friendly.

Resources

- Research commissioned by the RSPB underlines the strong links between good physical health, good mental health and the natural environment that we strive to protect.
<http://www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/policy/education/research.aspx>
- The Sustainable Development Commission has published a report on the role of the environment in building resilience, responsibility and employment chances for young people. It highlights how young people can improve their health, behaviour and sense of personal responsibility through environmental activities and volunteering, with direct relevance to reducing youth offending.
<http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=1113>
- The Community Space Challenge, managed by Catch22, is for young people to change forgotten and neglected areas of a neighbourhood into fresh green spaces for the whole community to enjoy.
<http://www.communityspacechallenge.org/>
- The John Muir Award has produced an environmental policy to help it to be aware of and lessen the impact of its work on the places it works.
www.jmt.org/jmaward-environmental-policy.asp
- The JustAct website supports voluntary and community sector organisations to help each other create, implement and review their action plan on climate change. It includes resources such as the *Changing the way we work* guide.
<http://www.justact.org.uk/>
- In his book *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today's wired generation—he calls it nature-deficit—to some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as the rises in obesity, attention disorders, and depression.
<http://richardlouv.com/books/last-child/>
- OPENspace is an international research centre contributing new evidence on why inclusive access to the outdoors matters. This report looks at the role of wild adventure space in young people's lives.
http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/pdf/wasyp_finalreport5dec.pdf
- Children England's *Green Page* includes links to useful resources and other publications on the environment.
<http://www.childrenengland.org.uk/index.php?pageID=1512>
- A National Children's Bureau and Institute of Development Studies project explored the organisational change tools and processes that child and youth organisations need to develop more climate friendly and climate resilient activities.
http://www.ncb.org.uk/osow/about_us/climate_smart_future.aspx
- Green Prints was a three-year funding programme to enable 16-25 year old volunteers to improve green spaces. The report provides evidence of the outcomes for young people involved.
www.sitatrust.org.uk/documents/95

- A report from BTCV on the impact of environmental volunteering – *Inspiring People, Improving Places The positive impact and behavioural change achieved through environmental volunteering with BTCV*
<http://www2.btcv.org.uk/BehaviourChange.pdf>
- NCVO's report *The Sustainable Organisation: what does sustainable development really mean for voluntary and community organisations?* has suggested that sustainable development has direct relevance to the missions of many voluntary and community organisations. It proposes that non-environmental organisations should be supported to consider how sustainable development fits with their core activities.
[http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sites/default/files/UploadedFiles/NCVO/Topics/NCVO New Frontiers sustainable development report.pdf](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sites/default/files/UploadedFiles/NCVO/Topics/NCVO%20New%20Frontiers%20sustainable%20development%20report.pdf)

NCVYS members including the RSPB, the National Trust, Think Global and the Woodcraft Folk offer a wealth of experience and information about the environment.