

Revitalising conservation: the fountain of youth

This article explores how we can engage young people in conservation. Drawing on their work with Action for Conservation, the authors explore lessons from other disciplines which highlight the importance of collaboration across organisations, sectors and communities. They suggest that, above all, we must recognise young people as the revitalising tonic that they are and that conservation so desperately needs.

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Clarifying conservation

Imagine this: you walk into a room of thirty four year olds from a school in South-East London. You ask them ‘what do you think conservation is?’

Silence. Some shuffling. Then a few tentative voices start to explore the question: ‘zoos’, ‘building national parks’, ‘err...lions’, ‘protecting habitats’. You nod encouragingly, and then one confident voice pipes up above the rest - ‘but what can we actually do, you know, ourselves?’ Quite!

The question ‘what is conservation?’ doesn’t only baffle 14 year olds; it poses problems for those who have worked in the field for years. As Emily Adams points out, conservation is complex ‘part vocation, part crusade, part crisis-driven and often ideological and self-righteous’.¹ Now divisions between those who believe that nature should be protected for its own sake and those who believe it has a more instrumental value threaten to derail progress² and reading the last issue of *ECOS* it is clear that there are many working in conservation who worry about its future; who believe, like David Blake, that conservation today is in the doldrums, drifting listlessly with no energy or courage to break new ground.³

These are symptoms of a broader identity crisis within the field that must be countered through innovation, collaboration and the creation of new narratives that make conservation relevant to new groups of people who will revitalise the field through their involvement. It was with this in mind that we set up Action for Conservation (AFC) as a charity in 2014. We are a group of young conservation professionals with a vision that every young person (aged 11 to 18) in the UK should be moved and empowered to protect the natural world, and we hope to achieve this by bringing the magic of nature into UK schools, inspiring a youth movement committed to conservation and to the earth. We initially saw an opportunity to visit schools and inspire an age group who are underrepresented and wrongly perceived as ‘largely uninterested’⁴ in some conservation circles. It is now clear that we can also reinvigorate our field with their insights, by offering work experience opportunities locally through our partner conservation organisations, such as the National Trust

and many of the Wildlife Trusts across the UK. There are young people ready to get involved in conservation across the world and we must welcome their contributions. The answer to that confident student from South-East London, who as it turns out is far from a lone wolf, should be, ‘help us, help us increase our relevance, help us empower others, join us in this movement’.

The forgotten years

Reports by organisations such as the National Trust and the RSPB tell a story of increasing childhood disconnection from nature and the result, ‘nature deficit disorder’.^{5,6} It is concerning that ‘acorn’ and ‘bluebell’, considered no longer relevant to children’s lives, have been replaced in the Oxford Children’s Dictionary by ‘hashtag’ and ‘tweet’⁷ and that children are missing out on the improved mental well-being, resilience, confidence and achievement that learning in nature provides.^{8,9} However, through the increasing popularity of programmes for primary school children such as the Forest Schools movement¹⁰, and a huge number of other projects set up to redress this balance, many of which are active members of the burgeoning ‘Wild Network’,¹¹ children are taught to love and connect with the rest of the natural world early on. For those navigating the wilds of secondary school, however, a lack of widespread and ongoing engagement threatens to dismantle the solid foundation we have built with our children. A huge proportion of young people in the UK haven’t considered conservation as a field of work, have no links within the sector and would be unsure about how to help the natural world. For example, although environmental volunteering in the UK is thriving, with nearly 80 per cent of all those who volunteer on a regular basis engaged in projects that focus on conservation, the environment or heritage,¹² the number of young people giving their time to such projects remains low. Lack of confidence in capabilities, unfamiliar formal structures and organisational attitudes towards young people are just some of the reasons,¹³ and we have found that a lack of inspiration and understanding are also often barriers to engagement. This represents a failure to engage young people in the right way, not a lack of interest within this age group - one reason why being present in schools to inspire students face-to-face and answer questions about placements and opportunities is so valuable.

This isn’t to say that organisations across the UK aren’t doing fantastic work in this area – they are. The National Trust, Wildlife Trusts and Trees for Life are already working hard to engage groups of young people and overcome barriers within their own organisations. A Focus on Nature helps connect young people already interested in conservation and the Conservation Volunteers and our partners Froglife are making vital efforts to engage young offenders and those outside mainstream education using practical conservation work.¹⁴ There are also examples of successful collaborations with youth work organisations outside of the conservation sector, for example, the North Wales Wildlife Trust and their efforts to improve levels of youth involvement by teaming up with the young volunteering network Gwirvol¹⁵ and the National Trust providing silver and gold Duke of Edinburgh award participants¹⁶ with volunteering opportunities. At AFC our work would be impossible without the support of a number of conservation organisations and individual conservationists who give up their time to lead workshops and inspire young people, but the

benefits of collaboration flow both ways. Our volunteer workshop leaders are able to promote their work whilst learning new methods of engagement through training we provide, ultimately returning to their place of work with new skills to share. Our partnerships allow us to offer work experience placements to young people from diverse backgrounds. In turn, partners create an extra layer of outreach at no cost, as we demonstrate the work that they do when offering placements to school groups. During work experience placements themselves, young people experience conservation and gain valuable skills, but they can also revitalise and imbue our partner organisations with their freshness of thought and optimism. As a community we should celebrate all of our successes, but we must also look to identify and share successful collaborative approaches. It is only through working together in a more coordinated fashion that we will achieve the scale necessary to tackle this problem.

An ecology of mind

Over the last five years conservation has suffered, Lisa Schneidau suggests in the last issue of *ECOS*, from too much emphasis being placed on eco-system services based arguments. Arguments that lose traction,¹⁷ if they ignore powerful narratives around the majesty of the natural world and fail to leave space for grassroots action, human diversity and creativity. Valuable lessons can be drawn from the broader environmental movement. In the last 10 years, environmentalism worldwide has experienced a grassroots renaissance, visible in the explosion of the divestment movement;¹⁸ the growth of permaculture and agroecological methods; the development of community energy programmes and the rise of everything eco-friendly. Youth activist group Earth Guardians, and its charismatic figurehead, 14-year-old Xiuhtezcatl Roske-Martinez, is just one stunning example of how young people have been empowered to take action for the planet, in this case by challenging the fossil fuel industry.¹⁹ COP21 was a key theme of this year's Friends of the Earth UK 'basecamp', that AFC attended. A feeling that climate talks in Copenhagen had been disastrous because too much faith had been placed in politicians pervaded the weekend. The consensus was that Friends of the Earth needed urgently to engage with the grassroots and other conservation organisations must recognise this too. An emerging environmentalism sees the natural world not as a resource, but a delicate web of which we are just one part, and which deserves our utmost respect and care. A line of argument that is particularly appealing to young people. This philosophy is not a new one – it's found in countless indigenous cosmologies and as early as 1972 Gregory Bateson called for a movement 'towards an ecology of mind', warning against the human folly of believing that we are separate from nature, but, as our Trustee, Robert Macfarlane, described in a recent article for the *New Statesman*, 'it is distinctive in its contemporary intensity'.²⁰ It is a diverse, progressive and exuberant movement, championing community, localism and democracy. It is identifiable in the building of transition towns; Forest Schools and the explosion of nature writing; the nationwide battle for allotment space²¹ and the rise of ecological therapy. Conservation urgently needs to establish its position *within* this conversation and not apart from it. If we are to be revitalised we need to re-engage the masses, we need to embrace an 'ecology of mind'.



Students participating in a warm up activity in a school in Wales, just before they debate the reintroduction of Lynx into the UK .

Photo: Sally Jones

The 'ACT' in action

Science is of paramount importance to conservation, but to build this 'ecology of mind' we must draw on a broad field of disciplines. All too often we hear students say that they can't get involved in conservation because they are not good at science or because they prefer English. As a community we urgently need to change this perception. Initiatives such as the New Networks for Nature²² or Synchronicity Earth's collaboration with the artist Louis Masai²³ and upcoming campaign on coral,²⁴ among countless others, bring the power and potential for inspiration within other disciplines into sharp focus and we should make the most of new spaces such as the Cambridge Conservation Initiative²⁵ to experiment and share.

Using the arts has hugely improved our effectiveness; we now use games and activities developed by drama practitioners: tables and chairs are moved to the walls and students are thrown into the drama of conservation, impersonating a lynx; debating rewilding or whether we should ever eat meat. Present a group of students with the statement 'some animals are more important to save than others', ask them to stand on an 'opinion continuum' and justify their decision and the discussions that follow will be fiery, insightful and you'll have trouble getting a word in edgeways. The results speak for themselves, in one term of operation we have engaged almost 1000 young people and over 97% feel they better understand conservation and why it is important and over 85% feel they understand what a career in conservation looks like and feel excited and empowered by the role they could play. Compare this with the lowered gazes and reluctant answers that we received in response to our first trial workshops using PowerPoint presentations and it is clear, there is no going back! Though we haven't yet gone as far as Østerskov Efterskole, a boarding school in Denmark, which uses a form of 'Live Action Role-Play' to teach its students all subjects,²⁶ we draw inspiration from their commitment to immersion through drama. Its benefits are widely recognised, role-play has been proven to help develop sociality in children with developmental disorders such as Asperger's Syndrome²⁷ and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed²⁸ has been

using re-enactment for years to tackle social oppression. Other conservationists are making steps in this direction too; Eco-drama²⁹ in Scotland are using theatre to educate primary students about green issues and following the huge success of one of its students in the baffling 'dance your PhD competition'³⁰ the University of Oxford's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, led by the Chair of our Trustees, David Macdonald, is undertaking research in this area. Of course we are not suggesting that all conservationists take to the stage or that drama is the only answer, engaging communication must be complemented with opportunities for young people to add their voices to the debate in a meaningful way, but if drama helps us inspire engagement, then play on.

Positive vibes

Another lesson we have drawn from our work is how vital positivity can be. In 2009 the government released a television advert to inform people about climate change and inspire them to act. A father read his daughter a bedtime story about how the human race is destroying the planet and at the end the little girl plaintively asks; 'will there be a happy ending?'. Did it work? No. Apart from the madness of creating an advert that presented climate change as a fairytale,³¹ the problem was that it simply told us a depressing story. It received 200 complaints from viewers for scaremongering about the effects of climate change. Rather than empower people to act, it threatened its viewers and contributed to what some see as mass melancholia in response to climate change.³² This is a familiar trap for anyone who has tried to communicate about the need to take action for the environment. More often than not, young people feel oppressed and disempowered by what seem like insurmountable global problems. We often see it when we first meet young people in our workshops, and it comes through loud and clear in the question put forward by that student from South-East London, 'what can we *actually* do?'. However, whilst positive communication is difficult when the news is all too often bad, it is not impossible. Last year the Climate Outreach Project asked young people aged 18-25 what they thought about the communication of climate change. Whilst the results didn't reflect well on past approaches, what is far more interesting are the solutions that these young people offered in return.³³ We should all take note and build the kinds of communication narratives that will inspire them. Buried somewhere between the volumes of scientific papers, political jargon and the bad news, there is an exciting story of change and empowerment. Every young conservationist who volunteers to deliver one of our school workshops is doing such inspiring work, that it merely falls to us to provide a magnifying glass to a group of young people who sit waiting, like a coiled spring, full of positive potential.

Yes conservation needs revitalising, but there are signs that this is occurring and exciting momentum to build upon. Across the UK and beyond, people from diverse backgrounds are taking all sorts of actions to rebalance their relationship with the environment in their own communities. Conservation needs to work with them, from the ground up, to create sustainable change. Young people are the future of this field and its lifeblood. In every classroom and school hall we encounter young people passionate about the environment and desperate to learn how to protect it. When they leave school, they should feel empowered to work for the benefit

of the natural world and receive support from a community of likeminded peers. Action for Conservation is one chapter of many; as we connect young people to opportunities and to each other through our workshops and with time, we hope, through developing an online community, we must reach out and collaborate with other organisations and disciplines. As a movement we must traverse diverse fields and frontiers to develop that 'ecology of mind', remembering that whilst we all have a different focus, the lessons we learn are valuable for everyone and, above all, that we have the most wonderful common cause to fight for.

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