



Youth Engagement Action Plan: Turning Insights into Impact

Supporting a new generation of diverse change makers. What can The Wildlife Trusts learn from young people?

A project funded by Zephyr Charitable Trust.

Dear reader,

In April 2024, we launched a 4-month project for The Wildlife Trusts, engaging over 300 young people (16-30) to explore their views on nature, climate action, and their motivations and barriers to getting involved with organisations like The Wildlife Trusts. Our findings revealed the complexity of "emerging adulthood," where career, family, finances, and identity issues often take precedence over engagement with environmental causes. These challenges are further intensified by social media, the cost-of-living crisis, COVID, and the climate crisis.

To ensure an authentic understanding, we trained and paid young people across the UK to interview their peers. The insights gathered were both thoughtful and encouraging, with a range of recommendations to improve access, inclusivity, and engagement, and to shift away from unpaid volunteer roles. We also consulted staff at various levels within The Wildlife Trusts to understand current efforts around youth engagement.

This actionable report is a condensed, practical version of our full findings. It is designed to help staff teams translate our research into action, with clear steps and recommendations to enhance youth engagement and safeguard the natural world.

Libbi, Marc, Rukaiya, and Samia
July 2024



Understanding Emerging Adulthood

The Wildlife Trusts have a huge chance to connect with emerging adults—those in the 16-30 age range—who are at a really interesting point in their lives. This stage is all about figuring out who they are, dealing with a lot of uncertainty, and feeling a bit “in-between.” It’s also a time when they’re super aware of environmental issues, but life’s challenges can get in the way.

These young adults care about the planet, but they’re juggling a lot—tight finances, crazy schedules, limited access to green spaces, and sometimes feeling like environmental groups are too exclusive or not for them. The pandemic added another layer, both making it harder to get out into nature and reminding them just how important it is.

To really engage with this group, we need to both better understand where they’re emerging adults are coming from, and meet them where they are. By understanding their struggles and what motivates them, we can find new, more inclusive ways to

“The last year has seen a lot of change. I graduated from university. I’ve done several internships. I’ve got into my first relationship in my life, and recently I got my first proper job. In the next few months, my biggest change will be focusing on my career because I don’t plan to stay in my current role for all that long and then I’ll be moving in with my partner... So yeah, a lot of change already happened. A lot of changes to come.”

AGE 23, EAST
SUSSEX

bring them into the fold. Let's meet them on their level, break down the barriers, and inspire them to take action for the environment in ways that fit their lives right now.

Recommendations

1. Enhance accessibility and flexibility of activities:

Provide free or low-cost events in urban areas and offer flexible options for engagement to accommodate financial and time constraints, making participation more accessible for young people and emerging adults.

2. Create paid opportunities and support youth employment:

Develop paid roles, such as internships and traineeships, to ensure accessibility for young adults who need to work. This will attract a diverse range of participants and show a commitment to supporting their involvement.

3. Tailor programmes to emerging adults' interests and schedules:

Design programmes specifically for young adults, including workshops, skill-building sessions, and adventure activities. Incorporate mentoring and diverse engagement opportunities that align with their interests and availability.



“Nature has not been incorporated into my education at all. Everything I know I taught myself: books on birdwatching, foraging books, and my mum has always encouraged me to garden.”

AGE 26, WEST
MIDLANDS

Working in partnership with secondary schools

Students and recent graduates are keen for more environmental education, and The Wildlife Trusts have a brilliant opportunity to step in and make a real difference. Over 60% of our survey respondents felt they left school without enough knowledge about nature and climate change. While less than half felt they knew about nature and just over half about climate change, only 17% understood community action, and just 6% were aware of eco-anxiety. Plus, over a quarter said none of these topics were covered during their schooling at all.

Green skills are also lacking from secondary curricula, with only 5% saying they received formal training in these areas during secondary school, with most of that learning coming through voluntary extracurricular activities. Even more concerning was the different experiences students had had across different schools and regions, with something like an environmental education lottery seeming to take place for young people across the UK and a real lack of consistency or equality of opportunity.

The great news? There's a strong demand for more nature-focused education. Schools are starting to include more environmental science and outdoor learning, with new tech making these lessons more engaging.



This is a fantastic chance for Trusts to partner with schools and address this gap. By working together, we can make sure every student gets the hands-on, inspiring environmental education they're asking for and get them excited about protecting our planet.

Recommendations

1. Forge strong partnerships with secondary schools:

Establish formal collaborations with local secondary schools to integrate hands-on environmental education into their curricula. Ask for opportunities to explore nature based learning across different subjects (for example reaching out to teachers via staff newsletters or teacher assemblies).

2. Promote nature's role in student wellbeing:

Develop and emphasise programmes that connect nature activities with mental health benefits for secondary school students. Collaborate with schools to incorporate these programmes into their wellbeing initiatives, helping students manage stress and improve mental health through outdoor experiences.

3. Empower students by involving them in decision-making:

Actively engage secondary school students in the Trusts' decision-making processes. Provide opportunities for them to participate in school-based environmental projects, advisory roles, or youth councils, ensuring their voices influence the direction and activities of the Trust.

The significance of Social Media

Right now, The Wildlife Trusts are missing a big opportunity to connect with emerging adults on social media—the very platforms where they're most engaged with nature and climate issues. A massive 90% are turning to TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook for their updates, but they're not seeing enough (or in most cases anything at all) from Trusts in these spaces.

These platforms, driven by algorithms, have a huge influence on shaping the views of their users, with a culture of discovering and sharing content that supports people to gain recommendations from friends, jump on trends from influencers, and join local groups. While they do use Google for deeper dives and sign up for newsletters, social media is where their attention (and time) is.

The Wildlife Trusts need to step up their game and start creating content that's fun, shareable, and speaks to young people's digital habits. By getting active on these platforms, we can finally reach this passionate group where they spend most of their time and inspire them to take action for the environment. It's time to meet young people where they are—on social media—and make sure they know we're here, ready to engage and empower them.

“Not that many people know about The Wildlife Trust. I feel like they should promote it on social media and target like Gen Z audience a bit more. Because I've never heard of them before and I feel like that's a great opportunity for them to engage with us young people. So we can play a crucial role in helping the environment.”

AGE 20, LONDON

Recommendations

1. Develop a youth-focused branding and communication strategy:

Create a distinct marketing approach to make The Wildlife Trusts more recognisable and accessible to young people. Ensure messaging highlights safe, inclusive spaces, and collaborate with young people through competitions, guest blogs, and social media takeovers to make content more relatable. Consider launching a digital newsletter or blog aimed at young people, featuring interactive content like wildlife photography contests, volunteer spotlights, and conservation tips.

2. Launch targeted Social Media campaigns:

Focus on platforms where young people are most active, such as Instagram and TikTok. Utilise storytelling and user-generated content to foster a sense of community and promote conservation efforts.

3. Upskill staff:

Upskill staff in messaging for emerging adults, social media trends, algorithms, and paid advertising to effectively reach and engage young people. Explore opportunities for upskilling charity staff through organisations such as Media Trust, Social for Good and Google Digital Garage.



“Co-create spaces with young people, don’t just feel that you have to do it all on your own. I think the best events that I’ve gone to have been done through authentic collaboration through different generations where different age groups had a say in what would make this event a success.”

AGE 28, LONDON

Becoming more relevant and grasping opportunities

The Wildlife Trusts have a real chance to connect with emerging adults by rethinking how they engage with this diverse group. To truly resonate, it’s time to focus on inclusivity, accessibility, and what matters most to young people today.

Let’s start by making sure everyone feels welcome with more inclusive and accessible experiences. Everyone should have the chance to get involved with their Wildlife Trust, so diversity and representation should be front and center. When young people see themselves reflected in the Trusts, they’re more likely to engage and trust the message.

Empowering young people with real leadership roles is a game-changer. Give them the chance to make decisions and lead projects, and they’ll bring fresh energy and ideas that could transform the organisation.

Finally, connect environmental action to the issues young people care about—like careers, mental health, and social justice. Show how protecting the planet aligns with their goals, and they’ll be more motivated to get involved. By focusing on these areas, together we can become more relevant and inspiring to emerging adults, empowering



them to take the lead in protecting our environment. It's time to listen, adapt, and make sure every young person feels included and ready to make a difference.

Recommendations

1. Integrate inclusivity and accessibility into all programmes:

Ensure that The Wildlife Trusts' work with young people is fully aligned with the organisation's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) strategy. Prioritise making all activities, events, and communications inclusive and accessible to diverse communities, with regular opportunities for refresher training and updates for staff on these issues.

2. Prioritise authentic and sustainable youth engagement:

Move beyond tokenistic gestures by actively involving young people in decision-making, consulting them on projects, and incorporating their feedback into organisational practices. Wherever possible, build youth engagement into core roles and priorities, ensuring young people have a sustainable and meaningful role in the Trusts' work.

3. Enhance access and relevance through flexible policies:

Improve access to natural spaces by organising transportation options and offering flexible, inclusive volunteering and recruitment policies that focus on emerging adults' strength and what people can bring.



An UpRising checklist for designing programmes for diverse youth

The following framework is developed from insights from our primary research with young people, the existing 2023-2030 Wild About Inclusion Framework from The Wildlife Trusts, and from existing frameworks by Shape Arts. For the full checklist including relevant impacts please see the full report hosted on WildNet.

In planning your event, you should consider the following:

1. Scheduling and timing

- ☒ Is the event scheduled at a time suitable for young people?
- ☒ Have you accounted for religious holidays or special days?

2. Accessibility and inclusivity

- ☒ Can participants physically access the venue, including toilets, water, and quiet spaces?
- ☒ Are accessibility needs being collected and addressed?
- ☒ How will you design activities to proactively accommodate differently abled individuals?
- ☒ Are all expectations and limitations clearly communicated?
- ☒ Are speakers and organisers informed about access and inclusion requirements?
- ☒ Where activities require equipment such as protective or specialist clothing, are you able to proactively provide this?

3. Diversity and representation

- ☒ Does the team and the event reflect diversity in gender, age, background, and discipline?
- ☒ Have diverse perspectives been consulted if the team lacks representation?

4. Participant Engagement

- ☒ Will you encourage participants to attend with a peer?
- ☒ Can participants engage at different levels based on their comfort?
- ☒ Are participation rules clear and transparent?
- ☒ How are cultural and educational differences being addressed?
- ☒ Are transportation and costs being managed?

5. Logistics and Requirements

- ☒ Have dietary requirements been collected?
- ☒ Is protective clothing or equipment required and communicated?

6. Communication and Information

- ☒ Has the event been announced to all relevant communities?
- ☒ Who is responsible for photo consent?
- ☒ Is there a contact point for feedback and inquiries?

7. Online Event Considerations

- ☒ Are netiquette and participation guidelines clear?
- ☒ How will you handle unresponsive participants ("ghosts")?
- ☒ Is interaction moderated, especially for early-stage participants?
- ☒ Are networking opportunities provided?

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. We hope it proves useful and engaging, helping you and your team make a meaningful impact within your Trust.

As we conclude this report, we're filled with optimism about the future of youth involvement in environmental conservation. We're particularly grateful to our diverse group of young contributors for their openness and honesty in sharing their experiences. Their passion, along with the variety of perspectives they brought, has been truly inspiring.

While challenges remain, the energy and fresh viewpoints these young voices contribute offer us a powerful platform to build upon. By embracing these recommendations, The Wildlife Trusts have an incredible opportunity to engage with a broader, more diverse group of young people. This will help create a more inclusive, impactful organisation that truly resonates with the next generation of environmental leaders.

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July 2024





Thank you.



The
Wildlife
Trusts



This report was prepared by UpRising on behalf
of The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts.

This research project was funded by Zephyr Charitable Trust.