

SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY

networks and environmental practitioners. The key message of the research is that a **shift** away from instruction and coercion of young people **toward opportunities for personal and social development can build capacity in the environmental volunteering sector and produce aspiring life-long environmental participants.**



Environmental Skills for Young People in Rural Communities

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Achieving More with Young People

Key Policy Implications

- Participants in unpaid environmental conservation activities develop a range of skills and knowledge that can help foster the development of sustainable communities in rural areas
- Partnership working between environmental groups and youth services often leads to good practice in environmental learning among young people and development of the sector
- Accreditation for the achievements of young people in ways that enhance employment prospects and future learning opportunities should be more widely available and less ad hoc
- Structured programmes of activity for young people should be based on young people's personal and social development
- Not all young people engaging in the sector are 'willing' and 'aspiring' participants in these activities. Many are 'cajoled' and 'coerced' into participation and as a result achieve less for themselves and their communities.

Full reports/results at: <http://tre-research.ex.ac.uk/esq/index.php>

Key Words

- Skills
- Young People
- Environment
- Rural

This research is one of 11 research projects commissioned from Universities across the UK, under the ESRC/HCA Academy Joint Targeted Initiative on Skills and Knowledge for Sustainable Communities.

To see how the HCA Academy is taking forward lessons from the research, visit:

<http://www.HCAAcademy.co.uk/>

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Further details of projects, contacts and associated briefing papers can be found at:

<http://gs.strath.ac.uk/suscoms>

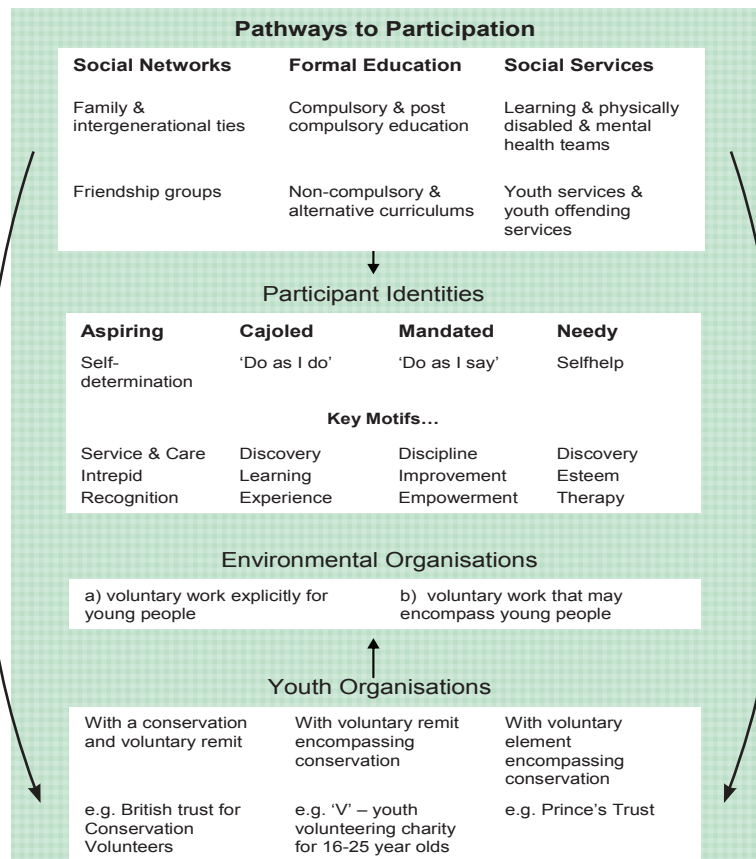


Background

Environmental conservation channels considerable voluntary time, energy, labour and enthusiasm into sustainable rural development. This research critically examines how opportunities to engage in voluntary/unpaid conservation are planned for and experienced by young people aged 14-25.

Approach

The researchers mapped the routes by which young people became involved in rural conservation as below:



Findings

The research results suggest that young people are a highly visible presence in rural environmental conservation, though the majority of young people who participate in conservation activities do not live in rural areas, but travel significant distances from town and cities to do so.

Only a limited number of environmental organisations/ groups offer programmes of activities that are specifically designed for young people or specifically recruit for them. Most groups within the conservation sector draw on a 'ready made' source of young people who find their way onto these activities because of the active work of wider community networks. While many, particularly larger environmental organisations, have community engagement officers, the active recruitment of young people into environmental conservation is rare. Indeed, most conservation groups in the study were passive recipients of young people rather than active enablers of their participation.

Most groups within the conservation sectors draw on a 'ready made' source of young people such as schools, youth organisations and youth services

Organisations and groups involved in environmental conservation believe their activities develop a range of life-skills for participants such as 'team working' and 'adaptiveness' although skills of leadership, management and co-ordination are often de-emphasised in these activities. External accreditation occurs in a surprisingly small number of cases. More common was an emphasis on internally defined structures of certification and award giving, which are key ways of building esteem among young people, but do not map on to the wider labour market so effectively.

Young people cajoled without explanation into routine activities such as digging ditches or clearing scrub see themselves as 'slave labour'

While most conservation activities contain an element of active thinking and knowledge acquisition (e.g. monitoring and recording activities and designing features of landscape), many are dominated by routine "grunt work" (e.g. digging holes; building footpaths; clearing scrub). Such activities are often regarded as a way of keeping fit (so called 'Green Gyms'), but young people cajoled into these activities often see an element of 'slave labour' in them (or 'chain gang' conservation).

Those working for conservation organisations are often trained in the environmental sciences, but many felt ill-equipped and unprepared to manage activities as opportunities for youth development, even if they wished to. Equally some organisations from the youth sector involving themselves closely with conservation activities employ individuals who are strongly motivated by issues of youth development, but who find themselves ill-equipped to deal with managing environmental projects. Thus, **individuals at the heart of sustainable community networks may not be adequately equipped to facilitate environmental learning among young people.** For environmental conservation to realise its role within the development of sustainable communities there is a need to 'train the trainers'.

The issue of youth involvement in environmental conservation is less about how to foster greater numbers of young volunteers into these activities than how to structure these activities in more productive ways. In the context of sustainable rural development environmental conservation plays a critical role in cultivating an ethic of community contribution and environmental care. The research suggests that it is here that the aspirations, capacities and esteem of young people are most likely to be developed.

Environmental education for the sole purpose of the external governance of youth through self-improvement and discipline does not work for young people. Crucially, the success of the sector is dependent upon building effective working partnerships between both youth development