

Summary Report from Good from Woods Partners

The project: Exploring the well-being outcomes of tree planting activities for young people

The organisation: Woodland Trust

The project researcher: Nicky Puttick and Vickie Hughes (The Silvanus Trust)

Participant group: Secondary school students in the St Austell area of Cornwall; aged between 11 and 16, with the majority of participants (64%) aged 12 or 13. The participating schools were: Roseland Community College (Tregony), Penrice Community College (St Austell), Brannel School (St Austell) and Poltair School (St Austell).

Number taking part: Survey – 113, Discussion groups - 18

Activity: Tree planting

Top 3 messages:

1. Adapt the way that tree planting activities are facilitated to take into account the main motivating (and wellbeing inducing) factors for young people; namely to create habitats for animals, plants and trees, to feel that they are acting within a nurturing/ care-giving role towards nature, and taking action towards a purpose greater than themselves.
2. Enable young people to access psychological, emotional, social and physical benefits through follow-up activities/discussion.
3. Ensure tree planting activity participants are not de-motivated to engage in further pro-environmental behaviour through feeling that they have 'done their bit'.

Background

This project was undertaken on behalf of the Woodland Trust. The Woodland Trust's aims are to:

- work with others to plant more native trees
- protect native woods, trees and their wildlife for the future
- inspire everyone to enjoy and value woods and trees.

They are based in Grantham, Lincolnshire but operate nationally with staff and volunteers being based around England.

Research focus

This project retrospectively explored the wellbeing outcomes of tree planting activities for young people. The research examined young people's memories, experiences of, and feelings towards tree planting. The research methods used consisted of an online survey, followed up by discussion groups held in schools.

Context

Tree planting activities took place in a variety of locations including school grounds, farmland, a disused china clay quarry site, private gardens and youth organisation grounds (e.g. cubs, brownies). The majority of young people we encountered had planted trees in their school grounds at various primary schools. We are uncertain as to the exact extent of this, and whether the school grounds were woodland or non-woodland sites. Some young people had planted trees in their gardens and other non-woodland sites.

As the research was retrospective, memories of previous tree planting experiences were explored. These activities could have taken place at any point prior to the research being carried out (in May/ June 2012), but the majority of young people had planted trees whilst at Primary school.

Expectations

A representative for the Woodland Trust was the only stakeholder interviewed for this project. He expected tree planting to benefit young people by providing enjoyment through the physical aspects of being outdoors and planting trees, and through experiencing a deeper/ spiritual connection with nature through planting a tree.

The stakeholder was also interested in the longer term impacts of tree planting, and cited studies which link childhood experiences in nature with pro-environmental behaviours in later years.

Methods used

An online survey was used to gather initial information and identify students who would be willing to participate in a discussion group about tree-planting. We designed a series of survey questions using 'SurveyMonkey' and built a simple website which allowed students to easily access the survey. The survey was designed to take between 5 and 10 minutes to complete, and was completed in school class time under the supervision of a teacher.

The survey was followed up with a discussion group at three of the participating schools. The discussion groups took place either in class time or during the school lunch break, and lasted a maximum of 30 minutes. Group size varied between 2 and 11 participants, depending upon which students had volunteered at each school. Basic content was planned prior to the groups taking place, with areas to explore in more depth identified from the initial survey findings.

Results

Our research identified the following wellbeing indicators in relation to memories of tree planting:

Self-transcendent Purposefulness

This was the most commonly identified wellbeing indicator in discussion groups, with 20 separate references recorded. This indicator was developed in response to comments from the discussion groups that referred to a sense of taking action for a purpose greater than oneself. Participants often linked this purpose to the global environmental crisis (usually phrased as "helping the environment"). This feeling of having positively influenced the future of "the environment" can produce a physical sensation of satisfaction; 'a warm glow', and a sense of increased emotional wellbeing. For example, one participant said: "It makes you feel kind of successful cos you're making a difference to climate change".

It is important to contextualise this indicator amidst the other feelings young people expressed about global environmental issues. Feelings of disillusionment, anger, sadness, helplessness, even fear of impending doom, appeared evident:

Researcher: "this whole notion of global warming... how do you sort of feel about that in general?"

E: "All humanity's achievements are for nothing."

Researcher: "Right. So you feel a bit helpless maybe?"

E: "Angry"

Researcher: "Angry – OK. So do you think that planting trees is maybe one way of you know feeling different about that?"

E: "Yeah, they'll slow it down."

This could indicate that the participants' knowledge that they had planted a tree in the past acts as a wellbeing resource that can be accessed in later years - perhaps enabling them to feel less helpless about global environmental issues, or create a psychological link between personal action and global environmental issues that is empowering.

Feelings of nurturing the natural world.

This was the second most frequently identified wellbeing indicator relating to tree planting activities.

This indicator is characterised as feeling that one is in a care-giving role towards trees, animals, ecosystems etc. This sense of being a caregiver/ nurturer to the natural world came up frequently in the three discussion groups. This indicator often combined with the 'self-transcendent purposefulness' indicator, but seemed to differ in that it relates more closely to personal action and depends upon a direct relationship with nature.

When completing the online survey, 79.8% of respondents to the question "Why do you think it is important to plant trees?" chose 'To provide habitats for animals, birds and plants' as one of up to 3 options they could select. This selection rate was significantly higher than other available options.

Young people derived a sense of wellbeing from directly benefitting plants, animals and trees. This was evidenced when participants were asked about what feeling connected to nature means to them and one

young person replied, 'Sort of like – like you're benefitting to the animals like helping them out to get along with life a lot more.'

Experiencing positive emotions and moods

Most reported instances of positive emotions and moods referred to feeling good because of practising pro-environmental behaviours. Participants did not generally seem to understand how tree planting could have a positive impact on their mood per se. This could be due to the amount of time that had passed since they planted trees, or perhaps because they identified the action so strongly as a pro-environmental behaviour.

For example:

Researcher: "Right, and how did it sort of make you feel to think that you were helping the environment?"

M: "Yeah it made me feel a little bit happier."

Feelings of closeness to the natural world

Feeling close to the natural world seemed to be an important aspect of the tree planting experience for many of the participants. This indicator was often referred to in conjunction with other wellbeing indicators that were perhaps more suited to participants' vocabulary or understanding, such as 'feelings of nurturing the natural world'.

When asked, 'Have you had any other experiences that have given you the same feeling, or a similar feeling [as tree planting]?' one young person answered, "Sometimes in the woods, basically where the plants have grown most, just in there, just, just makes me feel connected... Just sitting there and watching it."

Being engaged in a relationship with nature

When asked 'Can you think about anything in particular about tree planting that made you feel connected to nature...?' One participant said 'Well, I was sort of just, I just sort of like thought it could just be like a huge tree later on and just kind of have lots of animals inhabiting it.'

This quote is interesting in how it refers to the temporal aspects of being engaged in a relationship with nature. The tree planting experience in its nature is linked to the future of the tree(s) being planted. Being able to influence the future of an environment through planting a tree seems to be of significance to young people.

Developing Oneself

This was referred to in a discussion about feeling connected to nature. A connection to nature was sometimes understood as increased by purposeful pro-environmental behaviours, which could be entwined with this sense of self development.

One participant said 'Your mind's more open to what's out there and your emotions are much happier when you're with them.' when talking about being in an environment with plants and animals.

This was an area identified by the project stakeholder as being a likely benefit of tree planting. Given that many of the young people who participated in discussion groups seemed to struggle with self-reflection, the concept of self development may have been outside of their understanding. The act of discussing tree planting seemed to deepen participants' understanding of how previous tree planting experiences sat within their notions of environment, wellbeing and responsibility towards the natural world.

Reflections

The research has shown that young people do not consider that they personally benefitted from tree planting activities, but are largely focused on the impact that their actions have had upon the natural environment.

This may be due to the context in which tree planting activities were conducted and/or the environmental education that young people have received since tree planting.

Tree planting may help young people to generate a sense of self-transcendent purposefulness and to foster feelings of nurture and care for the natural world. These both appear to have a positive impact on wellbeing.

Many participants reported that by planting trees they felt that they were 'doing their bit' to help reverse environmental destruction and restore the natural environment. It is important to ensure that this feeling isn't de-motivating for partaking in future pro-environmental activities. The Woodland Trust may wish to consider scheduling in follow-up visits to schools that had previously planted trees as a way of 'cementing' the experience for young people and making best use of the opportunity to have a positive impact on future

environmental behaviours, and allow tree planters to access the less obvious benefits of tree planting through discussion and encouraged reflection.

The main challenge in conducting this research was engaging schools and keeping them engaged throughout the data collection stages. This was achieved to a satisfactory level, possibly helped by incentives offered by the Woodland Trust. However, we had to remind all schools to disseminate the survey to students and we lost contact with one school after the survey stage due to staff absence/ lack of handover.

Action points

- Ensure tree planting activity participants are not de-motivated to engage in further pro-environmental behaviour through feeling that they have 'done their bit'.
- Enable young people to access psychological, emotional, social and physical benefits through follow-up activities/discussion. Perhaps developing a curriculum to accompany tree planting activities which teachers can implement in class time.
- Increased awareness within the Woodland Trust and within schools of the opportunity that tree planting activities offer to empower young people with regards to global environmental issues, and demonstrate the sorts of pro-environmental behaviours that will positively impact on the future of the planet.
- Adapt the way tree planting sessions are facilitated to take into account the main motivating (and wellbeing inducing) factors for young people; namely to create habitats for animals, plants and trees, to feel that they are acting within a nurturing/ care-giving role towards nature, and taking action towards a purpose greater than themselves.

Summary of findings

Rank (most reported)	Wellbeing outcome	Associated factors (who, what and where)
1	Self-transcendent purposefulness	Tree planting
2	Feelings of nurturing the natural world.	Tree planting, and discussions relating to feeling connected to nature.
3	Experiencing positive emotions and moods	Tree planting, or discussing hypothetical situations relating to tree planting.
4	Feelings of closeness to the natural world	Discussion about feeling connected to nature
5	Being engaged in a relationship with nature	Tree planting
5	Developing Oneself	Discussion around feeling connected to nature

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