

# Young People & the Environment

*A Report by Action for Conservation – June 2024*



# Introduction



**This research, commissioned by Action for Conservation, marks the organisation's 10th anniversary in June 2024. We surveyed over 1,000 11-16-year-olds across the UK to learn how they felt about the environment.**

Action for Conservation (AFC) is a UK youth environmental action charity, we inspire and empower young people aged 12-24, from diverse backgrounds across the UK, to become the next generation of environmental leaders.

Our mission is to empower young people to take action that will benefit nature whilst also reducing their anxiety about the state of the environment. In our ten years, over 6,000 young people aged between 12 and 18 have been involved and taken action with the charity, via WildED secondary school and youth group workshops, residential Summer Camps and large-scale nature restoration projects.

In June 2024, we surveyed 1,000 young people to better understand how they felt about the environment and if they'd experienced 'eco-anxiety' in their lives. AFC defines eco-anxiety as a sense of hopelessness about the state of the planet, including climate breakdown and the loss of nature, which can lead to feelings such as fear, stress and anger.

The insights from this survey reveal that 64% of young people aged between 11 and 16 are experiencing eco-anxiety. Alongside this, young people are frustrated with adults for not advocating for their future, with 62% of respondents stating they do not feel adults, including politicians, teachers and parents, listen to their ideas and worries about the future and state of the planet.

Hendrikus van Hensbergen, Founder and CEO of AFC, says: "We see first-hand the impacts of eco-anxiety but also how direct experiences in nature and participation in positive actions for nature alleviate these worries"

"This survey shows young people want adults in their lives – from politicians to teachers – to listen to their concerns and create space for them to be a part of decision-making. Action for Conservation works to empower young people to take positive action for nature today and have a say in shaping the landscapes of tomorrow."

# Summary

**Between 10-15th May 2024, 1,003 young people aged 11-16 were surveyed by Action for Conservation, to understand how young people feel about the environment.**

Action for Conservation commissioned Censuswide to conduct this research.

The survey was conducted across 12 regions of the UK: East of England, Greater London, East Midlands, West Midlands, North East, North West, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South East, South West, Wales and Yorkshire and the Humber. The breakdown of young people's locations can be seen in Figure 1.

Participants were aged between 11 and 16 at the time of the survey, the distribution of respondent's ages was: 11 (14%), 12 (15%), 13 (20%), 14 (18%), 15 (19%) and 16 (14%).

53% of respondents identified as boys and 47% as girls.

Young people were asked to describe their ethnicity: 1% preferred not to say, 77% said white, 9% said Black, 7% said Asian, 5% described themselves as being of mixed descent and 0.4% selected any other ethnic group.

	%	Count
East of England	9.2	92
Greater London	13.9	139
East Midlands	7.2	72
West Midlands	9.3	93
North East	3.8	38
North West	9.7	97
Northern Ireland	2.1	21
Scotland	8.3	83
South East	15.2	152
South West	7.8	78
Wales	5.3	53
Yorkshire and the Humber	8.5	85
		1003

Figure 1. A breakdown of young people's locations



**43% of young people  
spend as little as  
8.5 minutes in  
nature each day\***



**ACTION**  
FOR CONSERVATION

\*43% of children spend just 1-2 hours in nature per week (that's just 8.5-17 mins a day)



# Findings

**64%** of young people aged between 11 and 16 are experiencing **eco-anxiety\*\***

**64%**

**23%**

Almost a quarter (23%) **suffer with symptoms of eco-anxiety at least once a week**

**9%**

**9%** experience eco-anxiety **every day**



**62%**

**Do not feel adults**, including politicians, teachers and parents, **listen to their ideas and worries about the future** and state of the planet

**37%**

Feel that, although the current state of the environment is scary, **there are tools available to make positive change**



\*\*A sense of hopelessness about the state of the planet, including climate breakdown and the loss of nature, which can lead to feelings such as fear, stress and anger.

Young people who are experiencing eco-anxiety report that the top ways to help manage these feelings are:

Learning how to protect the environment in school

58%

Taking action to improve nature

48%

Spending time in nature

46%

The news

13%

Watching the news was  
rated the least helpful!



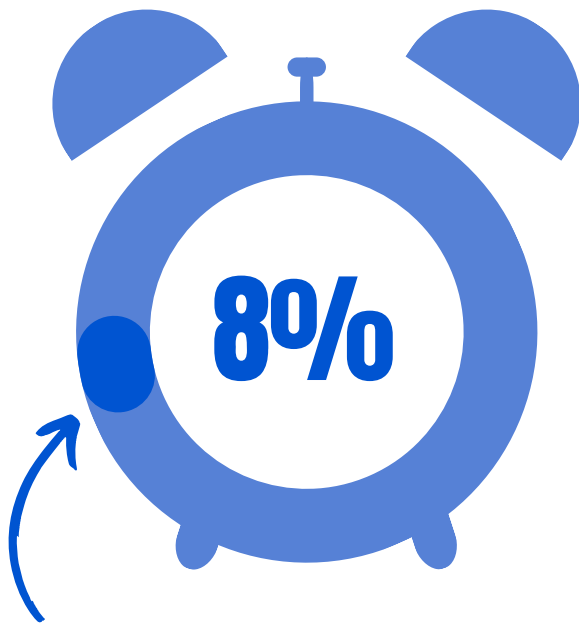


# Time Spent in Nature



**43%**

43% of young people spend just **1-2 hours** in nature per week



**8%** of young people spend no time or less than one hour a week in nature

**11%**

Of 14-16 year-olds spend on average no time or less than one hour a week in nature

**Young people aged 16 are less likely to spend time in nature than those aged 11**

**5%**

Of 11-13 year-olds spend on average no time or less than one hour a week in nature

# How Can We Help?

## Remove Barriers to Accessing Nature

As this survey shows, time spent outdoors in nature declines in young people's teenage years and so young people are systematically missing out on the benefits of nature: a positive impact on their learning, behaviour, health and wellbeing. Several factors are linked to this including increased school work associated with examinations, feeling unsafe in outdoor spaces, opportunities being restricted to teenagers over the age of 16, poor access to green spaces and the cost of opportunities. In addition, time spent in nature is heavily weighted against those from under-represented and marginalised backgrounds. This is compounded by the environmental sector itself being one of the least diverse in the UK in employment terms, and 'conservation' more broadly is failing to include and appeal to young people from diverse backgrounds.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

## Nature Education

Schools can play an important role in helping children and young people tackle eco-anxiety. This includes introducing opportunities for young people to play a role in decision making and practical action to improve nature within their school grounds; helping young people foster meaningful connection to local spaces and community partners taking action locally; and teaching about the ecological crisis in a meaningful and relevant way. There is a growing need to better integrate climate justice, sustainability and positive action into all subject areas so that young people are better equipped to engage with the complexities of the climate crisis with hope, skills and creative thinking.

## Empower Young People To Take Action

Empowering young people with the opportunities to develop, understand and participate in practical nature restoration actions is one of the best approaches to combatting eco-anxiety. This enables them to make a real difference in their local area and build positive relationships that will support them into their adult lives. This hands-on action could be starting small at home, by sowing some pollinator-friendly seeds in a garden or in pots on a windowsill. Young people could also join (or found) their school's eco-club or volunteer with a local park group or at nature reserve.

## How Action for Conservation does this

### Practical Action with Schools & Youth Groups

Our WildED workshops connect young people to nature and empower them to tackle environmental issues that are relevant and important to them. Activities focus on building knowledge, skills and connection through sensory explorations in nearby nature, discussions and debates, practical action, storytelling and craftivism. Young people then harness their inspiration to lead meaningful projects that positively impacts nature and people in their local communities.

### Immersive Experiences in Nature

We lead free residential Summer Camps in UK National Parks for young people from diverse backgrounds who want to learn more about what they can do to help nature in their everyday lives. During Camp, young people explore habitats, see incredible wildlife during bird ringing, moth trapping and bat walk sessions and participate in practical action and citizen science. The Camps provide an opportunity to create a new community of friends and build greater resilience and confidence to tackle environmental issues in their local area.

### Long-term Engagement

After Camps, young people are invited to join our year-long Ambassador Programme where they take part in webinars with experts and action days out in nature. Ambassadors help us design the activities they participate in and we support them in pursuing independent projects in their communities. This programme provides a space for young people to explore nature and discuss their ideas and concerns in a community of their peers, which fosters long-term care and connection to the living world.

### Youth Voice & Decision-Making

We support Ambassadors to access meaningful decision-making opportunities through our Youth Leadership Groups, Youth Trusteeships, advisory positions and green careers, volunteering and education. The Penpont Project, our flagship nature restoration site in Wales is leading the way with this work. At Penpont and our other UK projects, young people play a central role in decision-making at scale and hands-on nature restoration, from tree planting to pond creation. We run paid youth ranger and young artist-in-residence programmes to enable young people to explore green careers. Wherever possible, we give young people an opportunity to mentor one another and step into leadership roles that build their confidence.





**I've learned that nature is really good for my mental health and it's really relaxing. My mental health is better now that I'm in nature more. My life feels better and I feel happy.**

*Daniel, aged 13, Bristol*

*Student who participated in AFC's WildED workshops*







# The Penpont Project Case Study

**Launched in 2019 on a 2,000-acre estate in the Bannau Brycheiniog (Brecon Beacons), Wales, the Penpont Project is the largest intergenerational nature restoration project of its kind anywhere in the world. Initiated by AFC, the Penpont Estate and a dynamic Youth Leadership Group of twenty 12-18-year-olds from diverse backgrounds, the project aims to:**

- Restore natural processes and regenerative farming practices to Penpont;
- Embed youth leadership and participatory approaches in ecological restoration practice;
- Forge a shared vision for the future that will create diverse social, ecological and economic opportunities for all project partners;
- Create an education hub that can serve young people from the local area and beyond for decades to come.





The Penpont Project offers an insight into the incredible progress that can be made when young people are welcomed into nature restoration planning efforts and empowered to play an active role in decision-making.

The people who call Penpont home are not abstract beneficiaries of a top-down approach to nature's recovery. From the start the project decided that, as a community of young people, farmers, foresters, landowners and charity workers who will change as the land changes, we are all equal participants in the project.

Alongside the more-than-human beings who call Penpont home, we are leading a push for the holistic recovery of nature, culture and community, with a particular focus on enabling young people to step into leadership.

Together we have been on a journey to better understand Penpont, particularly using eco-cultural mapping tools. Developed by Indigenous communities and anthropologists, these maps help make otherwise invisible knowledge and relationships to land visible. At Penpont, the maps have revealed the causes and multifaceted impacts of the drastic decline in once abundant and beloved species.

The mapping process has fostered important, sometimes difficult conversations, levelled power dynamics and enabled all of us to articulate an ambitious shared vision for the future, rooted in the potential of the past and the opportunities of the present. Esther, member of the Penpont Youth Leadership Group, says:

**“Without this mapping effort and these discussions, we would not have been able to collaborate in creating the shared vision for a wilder future at Penpont that we are all now striving to achieve together in the action phase of the project.”**

All members of the Penpont Youth Leadership Group think that:

- AFC's past, present and future mapping process was effective in creating a shared vision for the project;
- They have experienced an improvement in their wellbeing thanks to their involvement;
- Being involved has made them more interested in studying, volunteering and/or a career in protecting and restoring nature.

So far we have planted more than 10,000 native trees, created and restored three ponds and 1.5km of historic hedgerows, implemented regenerative farming practises and welcomed hundreds of local school students and youth group members to explore the site and take positive action.

Ultimately, we aim to re-make good relations with the non-human living system that is Penpont. We want to play our role in helping this special place emerge as somewhere wilder and more abundant; a place rich and diverse enough to be interesting for everybody, always.

As our project progresses, we will work to make Penpont an exemplar for how youth leadership and collective action across generations, sectors and knowledge systems can achieve the intertwined recovery of nature, culture and community. We aim to bring policymakers, land-managers and the conservation sector with us on this journey, influencing wider change in the UK.

**Read the Penpont Project  
interactive story here**

**Q1. How many hours per week do you think you spend in nature  
(for example, going on a walk in your local park or camping)?**

			Age					
	%	Total Count	11	12	13	14	15	16
<b>Less than 1 hour</b>	3.4	34	1.4%	2.7%	2.5%	5.1%	4.8%	3.5%
<b>1-2 hours</b>	42.9	430	37.1%	43.3%	44.8%	37.9%	42%	52.4%
<b>3-4 hours</b>	27.3	274	37.1%	28%	28.1%	29.4%	21.3%	21.4%
<b>5-6 hours</b>	12.2	122	13.6%	14%	12.3%	12.4%	11.2%	9.7%
<b>7-8 hours</b>	7.7	77	5.7%	9.3%	6.9%	6.2%	12.2%	4.8%
<b>More than 8 hours</b>	1.7	17	0.7%	0%	2.5%	3.4%	1.6%	1.4%
<b>None</b>	4.9	49	4.3%	2.7%	3%	5.7%	6.9%	6.9%

Figure 2. How much time young people spend in nature, broken down by age.

**Q1b. How would describe your overall happiness levels?**

	%	Count
<b>Happy (Net)</b>	<b>82.3</b>	<b>785</b>
<b>Very happy</b>	20.9	199
<b>Happy</b>	61.4	586
<b>Neutral</b>	15.9	152
<b>Unhappy</b>	1.5	14
<b>Very Unhappy</b>	0.3	3
<b>Unhappy (Net)</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>17</b>

Figure 3. Young people's overall happiness levels



## Q2. How do you feel about the state of the environment?

	%	Count
It is scary, but I believe there are tools available to make positive change	36.8	369
I feel indifferent/am not concerned	17.5	175
It is frightening, and I'm not sure what can be done to save the planet	15.7	157
I feel great about it	14.3	143
Don't know / I have no feelings about the environment	8.2	82
I feel the planet and people are doomed	7.4	74
Other, please let us know	0.3	3

Figure 4. How do young people feel about the environment

## Q3. How often would you say you experience eco-anxiety?

	%	Count
Several times a day	3.1	31
At least once a day	5.8	58
At least once a week	13.7	137
At least once a month	14	140
At least once every few months (2-3 months)	12	120
At least once every 6 months	6.7	67
At least once a year	4.2	42
Once a year	3.6	36
Less than once a year	0.3	3
Never	36.8	369

Figure 5. A breakdown of how much young people experience eco-anxiety

#### Q4. What do you think would help reduce your or other children's eco-anxiety?

	%	Count
Learning about how to protect the environment in school	58.2	369
Taking action to improve nature & the planet (by doing a beach clean up or planting trees)	48.4	307
Spending time in nature	46.4	294
Speaking to friends & family	36.6	232
Making decisions about nature in my community	30.9	196
Watching documentaries about nature	29.5	187
Watching the news	12.5	79
Don't know	2	13
Other, please let us know	0.6	4

Figure 5. What helps young people manage eco-anxiety?

#### Q5. Do you feel that adults (including politicians) listen to children's ideas and worries about the future and the state of the planet?

	%	Count
<b>Yes (Net)</b>	<b>30.7</b>	<b>308</b>
Yes, absolutely	7.7	77
Yes, somewhat	23	231
No, not really	43.7	438
No, not at all	18.7	188
<b>No (Net)</b>	<b>62.4</b>	<b>626</b>
Don't know	6.9	69

Figure 6. How young people feel about adults in power

# Research Partner

The partner commissioned to conduct the research was Censuswide. Censuswide operates in accordance with the Market Research Society (MRS) code of conduct based on the ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Market Research) principles.

- [censuswide.com](https://www.censuswide.com)
- [mrs.org.uk/standards/code-of-conduct](https://mrs.org.uk/standards/code-of-conduct)
- [esomar.org/code-and-guidelines/icc-esomar-code](https://esomar.org/code-and-guidelines/icc-esomar-code)



# References

- 1 <https://www.sos-uk.org/research/racial-diversity-in-environment-professions>
- 2 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/the-two-sides-of-diversity/>
- 3 <https://www.the-ies.org/resources/challenging-environment>



# Thank you!

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our findings further, please don't hesitate to reach out to us.

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