Deep green, deeply ambivalent, or just like the rest of us? Young people, participation and the environment[1]

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Abstract

It is often assumed that young people have a particular interest in environmental issues – that younger generations are 'greener'. On the other hand, the view also circulates that young people are apathetic. What do young people really think about the environment? How are they involved in environmental actions? This paper considers these questions by drawing together and reviewing attitudinal polling and other research into young people's views. It seeks to challenge simplistic assumptions about 'what young people think' and instead acknowledge the inherently complex nature of young people's attitudes to environmental problems. Following Connell et al (1999) it focuses on the ways in which young people's environmental concern is mixed with 'frustration, cynicism and action paralysis'.

In response to these findings, the paper argues that greater attention should be paid to engaging young people in environmental issues, particularly in relation to policy development and decision-making. It provides two sets of reasons for seeking to improve the participation of young people in this area. The first draws on the rationale for young people's participation in decision-making generally, and the second on what is known abut young people's attitudes to environmental issues. The paper calls for a greater commitment to participatory approaches to working with young people on environmental issues. It argues that conceiving of young people as social agents, and supporting them to engage with environmental issues in new and more participatory ways is critical.

[1] Parts of this paper are drawn from previous work undertaken for the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change. The permission of the Department to use this work as the basis for this conference paper is gratefully acknowledged.

Introduction

It is often assumed that young people have a particular interest in environmental issues – that younger generations are 'greener'. On the other hand, the view also circulates that young people are apathetic. What do young people really think about the environment? How are they involved in environmental actions? This paper will suggest a response to these questions, with reference to attitudinal polling and other research into young people's views. I suggest that the findings of such research should challenge any simplistic assumptions about 'what young people think' and instead encourage an acknowledgement of the inherently complex nature of young people's attitudes to environmental problems.

In response to these findings, I will then make a case for paying greater attention to engaging young people in environmental issues, particularly in relation to policy development and decision-making. Finally, I will briefly suggest some of the components that an improved, more participatory and more effective approach should have.

Before beginning it may be useful to reflect on the definition of 'young people' as I use the term in this paper. The term 'young people' is a relative one, and indeed different researchers and different organizations use different definitions of the term. Some are referring to teenagers who are not yet legally adults, others include younger children, and others include young adults, with varying decisions about what the 'cut off point' is at which people are no longer 'young' – for some it is 25, for others it is older still. In many cases it depends on the context and the group to which 'young people' are being compared. For these reasons, I have not adopted a strict age range for the conception of young people I use in this paper, but rather am using the term in a fairly loose way to make a broad argument about the need to better engage people from secondary school age into early adulthood. Part of my call for greater attention to be paid to engaging young people would include the suggestion that a range of tailored strategies will be needed, depending on the age range of the group in question in each particular context.

What do young people think about the environment?

It is a common assumption that young people have a particular interest in environmental issues – that younger generations are 'greener' than older people. Is this true? What is young people's relationship to environmental issues? What do young people think about the environment? How are they involved in environmental action?

While almost any attitudinal research on this issue can be used to confirm statements such as 'the environment is important to young people', or 'young people are concerned about environmental issues', such claims require at least two critical qualifications. First, research with young people suggests that their concern for the environment is generally *not as strong* as that of older people, and second, that the environment is not an issue of *primary or relative importance* in young people's lives. In addition, the nature of young people's concern about and attitudes to environmental problems is complex. These points are explored in more detail below.

It is clear that the environmental issues are important to young people. Qualitative and quantitative research into the attitudes of young people towards the environment overwhelmingly finds that this group sees the environment as an important issue.

In a report for the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, Bentley et al found nine out of ten Australians aged 12-28 who were surveyed were either 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about the environment (2004:39). A 'youth poll' undertaken by the Australian Democrats found 76 per cent of respondents believe the government is not doing enough to protect the environment (Australian Democrats, 2003). These survey findings support earlier survey poll data from Victoria that found high levels of concern among 16-24 year olds for environmental issues, including 91 per cent who agreed that 'the threat to the environment is real and must be taken seriously', and four out of five favoured protecting the environment even if it means some reduction in economic growth (Melbourne Water: 2000). Qualitative focus-group research by Connell et al (1999) also found high levels of concern among young people about a range of environmental problems.

Findings such as these lead some commentators to claim that young people are particularly environmentally conscious. For example, in reference to the Victorian survey cited above, the Australian Conservation Foundation claimed that 'young people are leading the way in their attitudes to the environment' (Nolan: 2000). However, such a conclusion requires more critical consideration. While research conducted specifically with young people, such as that cited above, does tend to find that they view the environment as important, this is a view that is also held in the Australian community generally. To measure the *relative* level of concern about the environment among young people in particular, it is necessary to compare their views with those of older age groups.

Studies that allow age comparisons tend to find that environmental concern is actually somewhat lower among young people than among older people. For example, a recent ABS (2004) survey of Australians' environmental views and practices found that, compared to other age groups, young people have relatively low levels of concern about environmental problems. While the least concern was found among those aged over 65 years (just 47 per cent were concerned), those aged 18-24 showed the second lowest level of concern (49 per cent). In all other age groups, levels of concern were over 55 per cent, rising to 65 per cent for those aged between 45-54 years. Interestingly, when this survey is compared with a previous one undertaken in 2001, it shows that, while all age groups showed a decline in environmental concern between 2001 and 2004, it is in the younger age group where the decline has been the largest (from 57% in 2001 down to 49% in 2004 for those aged 18–24 years).

Denniss (2005) refers to similar findings from a 2003-2004 Roy Morgan poll of over 50,000 Australians aged 14 and over as evidence that young people are less concerned about the environment than other age groups. The survey found young people were less likely than average to agree with the statement 'at heart I am an environmentalist' (41 per cent of 14-17 year olds, and almost 55 per cent of 18-24 year olds, compared to a national average of 66 per cent). Further, these two age groups were slightly less likely than average to agree that urgent action is needed to address environmental problems. While it is people aged 65 and over who are most likely to believe that environmental threats are exaggerated, those in the 14-17 year age group are the second most likely to hold this view – with more than one in four believing this to be the case. These findings lead Denniss to conclude that 'there is little evidence to support the claim that environmentalism is particularly attractive to younger Australians' (2005:4).

The most recent in the series of 'Who cares about the environment' surveys conducted by the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation (2006:25) provides further evidence that younger people have lower levels of concern about

environmental problems compared to older age groups. The study found people aged under 25 were the least likely to express concern about environmental problems (78 per cent were concerned, compared to between 82 and 93 per cent for other age groups). Further, the level of concern was lower, with those aged under 25 being the group that were least likely to be 'concerned a great deal' (18 per cent).

Lower levels of concern may help explain lower levels of environmentally positive behaviour among young people. Denniss notes that 14-17 year olds, and 18-24 year olds were the two age groups in the Roy Morgan poll who were least likely to agree with the statement 'I try to recycle everything I can' (2005:3). The DEC survey found that people aged under 25 were significantly less likely to say they had often engaged in four out of ten pro-environmental behaviours over the last twelve months (2006:55). For nine of the ten behaviours listed, this age group was less likely than other age groups to say they had often or sometimes engaged in the behaviour (2006:61).

The one issue that may contradict the claim that young people are less concerned than older people about environmental issues is that of voting patterns. Young people are far more likely to vote for the Greens than older people. At the 2004 federal election for example, almost 20% of voters aged under 25 voted for the Greens, compared to about 7% of people aged over 30 (Bean, cited in Vromen 2006). However, this preference may be as much to do with positive perceptions about the Greens' youth (or other) policies, as it is a sign of the level of environmental concern among this group.

While it appears that environmental concern is somewhat lower among young people than among older people, there is also evidence to suggest that the environment is not an issue of primary or relative importance to young people when compared to other issues. A review of the literature on this issue suggests that, if asked specifically for their views about 'the environment', young people state that it is important, even very important. However, if they are asked a more open question about what issues are important to them, the environment does not tend to feature prominently. Further, if asked about the *relative* importance of environmental issues in their lives compared to other issues, then young people generally rank the environment as a low priority. Issues that are assigned greater priority tend to be those that are more 'personal' or immediately related to young people's lives.

For example, Manning and Ryan (2004:42) report that 81 per cent of young people in a national survey viewed the environment as 'important' or 'very important', yet it is ranked 13th overall in a list of 20 issues. Similarly in the Australian Democrats' most recent 'youth poll' (Australian Democrats, 2005), only 1 per cent of respondents placed environment in their top three issues of importance when given a list of nine issues to choose from.[2] Similarly, the results from the Mission Australia National Youth Survey 2005 (Mission Australia, 2005)[3] show that, compared to other issues, the environment is not highly valued by Australian young people. 'Environmental issues' was in fact ranked last overall in a list of 10 options, with only 8.7 per cent of respondents ranking it in their top three.[4] Given a list of 15 types of people or

[2] This poll is described as 'aimed at young people aged 15-20', however, it is not clear what the actual age range or breakdown of respondents was.

[3] This was a survey of people aged 11-24 years. Just over 50% of respondents were in the 15-19 years age group; with 45% aged 11-14 and only 4% aged 20-24. Hence the survey cannot be said to accurately reflect the views of people at the older end of this age range.

[4] This finding should be viewed with caution however, as the other issues in the list of ten were all 'personal' issues (such as relationships, friendships, independence, feeling needed,

organisations who they might admire, young people ranked 'environmental groups' 14th, with less than 2 per cent ranking them in their top three. Active involvement in environmental issues was also low, with only 6 per cent reporting involvement in environmental activities, less than for any other kind of activity.

In all these surveys, it is personal issues that are ranked of highest importance by young people. Findings from qualitative research confirm that young people are primarily concerned with 'personal levels of meaning' – their own relationships, education and careers, rather than with broader environmental (or social) issues (see for example, Connell et al 1999).

The research cited above should challenge any simplistic assumption that young people are 'greener' than older people. However, it is not the intent of this paper to replace this assumption with its opposite – that is that young people are 'less green', less concerned, or more apathetic. Rather, I am suggesting a need to explore the inherently complex nature of young people's concern about and attitudes to environmental problems. The qualitative work by Connell et al (1999) is instructive here. In their analysis of interviews with young people, the authors characterise young people's feelings about environmental problems and solutions as deeply ambivalent. They suggest that the young people they interviewed exhibited 'overwhelming feelings of environmental concern mixed with frustration, cynicism and action paralysis' (1999:95).

This description of ambivalence is supported by Eckersley et al (2006:37) who point to surveys of young people carried out in the last two decades that reveal a strong desire for a 'green' future, but a shaky (and declining) faith that this will eventuate. For example, when asked to chose between two positive scenarios, 84 per cent of young women in 1995 and 82 per cent in 2004 *preferred* a 'green' society focused on community, family, equality and environmental sustainability, but 64 per cent and 87 per cent respectively *expected* a 'growth' society focused on individual wealth, economic growth and efficiency and enjoying 'the good life'. This finding that young people have a deep sense of pessimism about environmental issues is supported by Connell et al (1999) whose young interviewees saw it as a 'reality' (not merely a 'belief') that environmental problems were going to get worse.

As well as being pessimistic about the future of the environment, young people sometimes exhibit somewhat limited ways of understanding the causes of problems and the potential of addressing them. Connell et al (1999) considered the young people in their study to have individualistic frameworks for explaining environmental issues. While they did point to government and industry contributions to environmental problems, and saw stricter laws and penalties as part of the solution, they generally viewed environmental problems as a result of people's attitudes and behaviours and believed that solutions will come from changes at this individual level. Personal experiences were also cited as the major and most reliable source of young people's information about environmental issues. While they also identified schools and the media as a source of information about the environment, many young people expressed a critical and even cynical attitude towards the media. The authors suggest that the heavy reliance on personal experience as a source of reliable information about the environment means that young people's analysis of environmental issues and solutions is likely to be 'simplistic and atheoretical' and

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school or study). 'Environmental issues' was the only 'global' item, so the survey does not allow a comparison between this and other issues of a similar scale and type. What it does confirm however is that 'immediate' or 'personal' issues are of overwhelming significance in young people's lives.

may cause them to 'become cynical about social institutions and possibilities for social change'. A similar individualistic framework was displayed by school students in a NSW Environment Protection Authority (2000) survey who generally did not have much faith in the ability of external agencies (such as government, business or scientists) to solve environmental problems, and placed greater faith in their own and their friends' and families' ability to solve such problems.

For Connell et al, the ambivalence expressed by young people helps explain why their concern for the environment does not translate into action. In fact, they describe the young people in their study as suffering from 'action paralysis' – or the feeling that they themselves could not really do very much to help the environment – with the exception of small actions such as recycling. They found that most had no experience in participating in environmental actions, were unwilling to consider actions such as letter writing or were deeply cynical about their effects. Obviously the views expressed by the young people in this study are somewhat contradictory – they believe change at the individual level is necessary, but they do not know what they themselves could do, and do not have a strong personal motivation to contribute – partly because they are pessimistic about the benefit of personal behaviour in light of the inaction of other people, government and industry.

Connell et al also note that few of the young people in their study seemed willing to acknowledge how their own actions could be contributing to environmental problems. Bentley et al (2004:39) note a similar 'disconnect between social concern and personal action' in the young people they surveyed about consumption. However, we should be wary about attributing this 'disconnect', ambivalence, or internally contradictory set of views only to young people. The failure to see the connection between one's own actions and environmental problems is certainly not confined to this group. Indeed the 2004 DEC 'Who cares about the environment?' survey found that, when people were asked about their own environmentally damaging behaviour, it was actually people aged *over* 35 who were more likely to report *no* environmentally damaging behaviours (25% compared to only 8% of those under 35) (2005:67). Indeed Creech et al (1999) suggest that young people may simply be responding to the knowledge-behaviour gap that is evident among their elders and authority figures – if no one else is taking action, then why should they?

This aspect of the 2004 DEC survey just referred to is interesting, as it suggests that, while they may not know what to do about it, many young people do have a high level of awareness of environmental problems. Indeed the findings suggest that people aged under 35 may be more conscious of their own environmentally damaging behaviours. This seemed particularly true in relation to waste – this age group was approximately twice as likely as older people to report wasting paper, not recycling enough, littering, generating too much waste, and allowing inappropriate things to go down the sink (DEC 2005:57).

Other surveys have found positive reports of individual action by young people. A survey of Victorian young people found 61 per cent had made an effort to reduce water consumption, 60 per cent had taken part in tree-planting, and 52 per cent in a clean-up campaign (Melbourne Water: 2000). Another interesting finding is that reported by Print et al (2005) who asked young people what protest movement they were most likely to join, and found that 30 per cent nominated the 'green/environmentalist movement'. This was the second most popular answer (after 'anti-war movement').

The kinds of attitudinal research cited above should demonstrate that there is no simple answer to the question 'what do young people think?' Like those of other

groups, the views and attitudes of young people towards the environment are complex and not necessarily internally consistent. Furthermore, young people are not a homogenous group. Any generalisations about 'young people' need to be qualified by an acknowledgement of the many differences among and between young people – they, like any other age group are a group characterised by differences and divisions marked by gender, class, cultural background, geography, levels of education and employment status, among many other factors. Vromen (2006) stresses that it is problematic to make universalising generalisations about young people's political experiences, noting that the differences between young people (she stresses gender in particular), are often more significant than the similarities among them.

Studies of environmental attitudes among young people have also noted various differences among this group, although the findings are not consistent. Hampel and Holdsworth's study of Victorian secondary school students for example, found higher levels of both environmental concern and environmentally responsible behaviour among girls than among boys. However, a more recent poll by Mission Australia (2005) found young men were one and a half times more likely than young women to rank environmental issues in their top three items, and slightly more likely to report involvement in environmental activities. Differences between the environmental attitudes of indigenous and non-indigenous young people have also been noted in Australian (Mission Australia 2005) and overseas (Creech et al 1999) studies.

Furthermore, just as young people are not a homogenous group, nor are 'young people's views' fixed in time, but rather are formed within a social, cultural and political context. This is a point illustrated by Denniss' observation that the apparently lower levels of environmental concern among young people may be because environmental concern takes time to develop in individuals, or alternatively may be the result of a decade of federal government policy and rhetoric that has played down the importance of environmental issues (2005:5). The fall in the number of young people who thought the government was not doing enough to protect the environment – down from 88 per cent in 2002 to 76 per cent in 2003 – recorded by the Australian Democrats Youth Poll (2003) could be seen to provide further support for this analysis. Indeed, this is consistent with recent ABS data showing a steady fall in environmental concern in the general population over the past decade.[5]

Clearly then, there is no simple answer to the question of whether young people are more or less 'green' than other groups. As shown above, there may be some generalisations to be made from the impressionistic picture provided by attitudinal data. However these must be accompanied by an acknowledgement that their views are as diverse as young people themselves, and that the existence of high levels of environmental concern mixed with 'frustration, cynicism and action paralysis' (Connell et al 1999) is certainly not confined to young people.

How are young people actively involved in environmental issues?

Attitudinal research is one way to assess the relationship of young people to environmental issues. Another is to look at what they are actually doing – how they are engaged with these issues on a practical basis. The second part of this paper briefly canvasses some of the existing avenues for action and involvement in environmental issues by young people. It then goes on to call for and provide a

[5] In May 1992, 75% of Australians aged 18 years and over reported concern about environmental issues, but this had fallen to 57% by March 2004. ABS 4613.0, Australia's Environment: Issues and Trends, 2006.

rationale for greater attention to be paid to enabling the participation and engagement of young people in environmental issues, particularly at the 'political' level.

There is a range of ways that young people are currently involved in environmental matters in a variety of different contexts. For the purpose of this review, these are considered to fall into two categories, the first type being the range of 'hands on', or 'environmental action' activities, and the second type being involvement in policy development, decision making and 'political' activity or activism designed to create change. It is acknowledged that this division is not a 'neat' one, and that there is some overlap between the two types, however, it is considered helpful as this review is focussed on the type of activities that fit more closely in the second category – young people's participation in environmental decision making and policy development.

However, while it is not the primary focus here, it is worth making brief reference to the various kinds of 'hands-on' environmental projects that many young people are involved in.

Various organisations run environmental projects specifically targeted to young people. Indeed, as the latest NSW Government's Environmental Education Plan notes, young people are one of the groups most commonly targeted by environmental education programs (NSW Government 2006). These projects usually work through schools, and typically combine environmental education and action elements. Many are site-specific environmental projects, based around monitoring and restoration. Examples of this type of program are Parks Victoria's Environment Corps program[6] for secondary students (environmental awareness and research and monitoring projects in state parks), OZGREEN's various 'My River' projects[7] (basin-based education and environmental action) and OZGREEN's 'Youth LEAD' program[8] (environmental action projects combined with leadership training, networking and mentoring for young people).

In a slightly different vein is GreenCorps; the federal government 'work-for-the-dole' program for unemployed young people aged 17-20, who undertake environmental conservation and restoration projects.[9]

Many young people are also involved in generalist (i.e. not youth-specific) environmental programs and projects. These include government funded community-based projects, such the commonwealth-funded Landcare, Bushcare, Rivercare, Coastcare and WaterWatch programs,[10] and numerous state government-funded community-based projects, such as those funded under the Environmental Trust in NSW. They also include projects organised by non-government organisations. For example, many young people participate in both CleanUp Australia Day and the specific 'Schools Clean Up Day'[11].

Clearly then, many young people are contributing in a practical sense to a range of

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[6] See: http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au/education/project.cfm?project_id=1
[7] See for example, the 'My River Cooks' website: http://www.ozgreen.org.au/CooksRiver/2006/Cooks2006.htm
[8] See: http://www.ozgreen.org.au/youthlead
[9] GreenCorps is a Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) program administered by Job Futures and Greening Australia. See: http://www.greencorps.com.au/
[10] See the Natural Heritage Trust website: http://www.nht.gov.au
[11] See Clean Up Australia website http://www.cleanup.com.au

environmental projects. But how are they involved in a more strategic or 'political' sense? The participation of young people in policy development, decision-making and activism on environmental issues falls into a number of categories.

Firstly, there are a number of 'youth' participation or consultation mechanisms established by state, local and federal government. These include youth councils and other mechanisms used by various levels of government to consult with young people. Examples are the federal government National Youth Roundtable (NYR), the various state government Youth Advisory Councils, and the youth councils attached to Councils in many local government areas. These mechanisms tend to focus on specific 'youth' issues, but there is some opportunity for a broader focus, which can sometimes include environmental issues. There is also one Australian example of a youth consultation mechanism that has a specific environment focus, namely the South Australian Youth Environment Council – set up by the South Australian government to seek the advice and involvement of young people in the environmental decisions and policies of state government agencies.

Secondly, some government-run community consultation processes on environmental issues include specific forums or mechanisms for consultation with young people. For example, local Councils sometimes establish a means of specifically seeking the views and input of local young people as part of their general community consultation. Common methods include focus groups of young people, or including young people in the sample for a survey.

Thirdly, many young people are involved in various forms of environmental activism. Activism may not traditionally be seen as a form of 'participation', indeed it is, as Vromen (2003:80) points out, often subject to a process of 'othering' whereby it is not seen as 'acceptable' citizenship activity. Nevertheless, environmental activism is a key site for political participatory activity for some young people. Vromen's research with young people aged 18-34 found that environmental organisations were the most common type of activist organisation with which this group had been involved (2003:89). While not formally linked to policy development and decision-making, lobbying and activism can obviously influence government and contribute to changing policy.

There are many examples of young people participating in environmental activism, campaigning and lobbying activities, both of their own making, and as part of established groups, networks and organisations. One example is the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN), which is 'a network of students active on environmental justice issues on their campuses and in their communities'. ASEN meets annually at the Students of Sustainability (SOS) conference, which attracts around 800 students for 'a week of discussion, workshops, plenaries and actions around a variety of different environment, indigenous and social justice issues'.[12]

To summarise the involvement of young people in environmental issues then, there are numerous opportunities for young people to participate in environmental projects, however, these are primarily 'hands-on' and site-specific environmental action projects. Many have substantial 'environmental education' components. They emphasise the importance of environmental *action*, and demonstrate how this can be achieved within young people's local communities. Such experiential learning projects have the potential to provide young people with valuable opportunities to develop their practical skills and knowledge, and make broader connections within their communities. However, these projects are not designed to contribute to

[12] Information from ASEN website: http://www.asen.org.au/

environmental decision-making or policy development. Furthermore, young people do not 'drive' these programs, but rather participate in a pre-determined way.

There are also some scattered opportunities for a very small number of young people to participate in activities of a more policy-focussed nature, primarily through structures and processes for 'youth consultation' established by local and state government agencies. These mechanisms aim to allow young people to 'have a say' and participate in debates that are linked directly to the work of government, and potentially to have input into policy development and decision-making. How effective such structures and processes are at translating young people's views into subsequent action is a debatable however. This issue will be discussed in the following section.

A rationale for extending the participation of young people in environmental issues

As I have discussed above, there are some current opportunities for young people to engage with environmental issues. However I suggest that the importance of improving and extending these mechanisms is still not widely understood or acknowledged. Accordingly, I want to suggest a number of reasons why this is a critical area for policy makers, educators and communicators in the environmental field. The first set of reasons draws on the rationale for young people's 'participation' in decision-making generally, and the second draws specifically on what is known about young people's relationship to environmental issues.

The large and growing literature on the issue of young people's participation, provides a clear rationale for developing participatory approaches to working with young people. This can be summarised as follows:[13]

1. Young people (including children) have a right to 'have a say' and have their views taken into account.

Much literature on youth participation takes a rights-based approach, and points to the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC). While the CROC specifically concerns people aged under 18, the Convention is nevertheless an important reference point for thinking about 'young people' in a broader sense. The relevant section is Article 12, which states that all children have a right to express their views in all matters affecting them and to have those views be given 'due weight' (United Nations 1989: Article 12). For young people, the environment is certainly one of the 'matters affecting them'.

2. Young people are social agents

Writers in the field of youth participation challenge the assumption that it is only once people become adult citizens that they can take part in the processes of debate, consultation, policy development and decision-making. Rather than being passive 'receivers' of decisions made by adults, young people are seen as protagonists who are very much a part of the current social process – as active players in their communities, decision-makers and 'agents of change' (Golombek 2002:6).

[13] This summary is adapted from Emma Partridge (2006) *Young people, participation and the environment in NSW,* report prepared for the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation, May 2006.

On this view, it follows that young people should be involved in environmental strategies, just like any other group. Their current views and behaviours have implications for the environment just like anyone else's, and far from passively waiting until they 'inherit' the environmental problems of previous generations, they can make an active contribution to current strategies for change.

3. The participation of young people develops their citizenship skills

The provision of participatory opportunities for young people has the potential to 'enable good citizenship' (Kester, 2002:5), or help young people to 'grow into citizenship' (Wierenga et al, 2003:21). Participating in processes of discussion and decision-making can building young people's citizenship capacities by helping them to develop and practice the kinds of skills that such active citizenship requires. Given the opportunity to participate, young people can 'begin to think of themselves as partners and stakeholders in society' and 'acquire a sense of responsibility for the common good, and internalize a positive attitude toward active citizenship' (Golombek 2002:7).

This view would suggest that increasing the active citizenship qualities of young people has the potential to lead to improved environmental outcomes, for developing solutions to the many environmental challenges we face certainly requires people to think of themselves as 'stakeholders in society' and to act in the interests of 'the common good'.

4. Strategies are more effective if they are targeted to young people, and developed with young people's input

Another reason for a specific focus on young people is the likelihood that policy will be more effective if it is targeted to a specific audience and developed with input from members of that group. Insights from the field of communications and social marketing suggest that strategies that are specifically targeted to their intended audience are particularly effective.

'Mainstream' communications about environmental issues may not reach all groups in the community. Many government agencies and other organisations already recognise this, at least to some extent, and in their attempts to inform, educate and engage the community on environmental issues, many already use a combination of 'generalist' and specifically targeted strategies.[14] Developing a clear understanding of young people's needs and priorities, their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours and their communication styles and modes can help organisations to design and deliver more effective communication strategies, projects and programs.

As well as being informed by an understanding of the specific attributes of the target group, there is an argument that policy is more effective if it is developed with input from members of that group. This view can be found in the rationale for young people's participation given by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People when it states that: 'Organisations are more effective if they involve children and young people in the design, development and delivery of services and policies.[15] Some writers describe young people as a particularly valuable resource for policy

[14] A good example of the application of this approach to a different group is the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation's work with ethnic communities. See http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/whocares/ethniccom.htm

[15] Commission for Children and Young People (NSW) website. http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/director/ourwork/participation.cfm

makers because they are a source of fresh ideas and new types of knowledge. Kester (2002) for example, sees young people as 'a great source of novel ideas' and 'outside views', which can 'help boost creativity and lead to new approaches to policy problems'. If this is the case, then it follows that involving young people in environmental policy development has the potential to lead to more effective policy and improved decision-making. This in turn has the potential to lead to improved environmental outcomes.

5. Participation provides benefits for young people, adults and organisations

A comprehensive review of literature on the participation of children and young people by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2001), found that participation offers children and young people a range of benefits, from the ability to 'have a say' to a sense of ownership about decisions, to an increase in confidence and skills, and a sense of empowerment.[16] It also gives adults the opportunity to 'show respect' for the views of children and young people, can be 'a catalyst for the wider participation of all parties' and 'can improve the quality of decision-making for the organisation'.

Clearly there is a sound rationale for improving the participation and engagement of young people in a whole range of areas. In addition to this, I want to turn now to what is known about young people's attitudes and behaviour specifically in relation to the environment, for this analysis provides further justification for improving the participation of young people specifically in the area of environmental policy development and decision-making. The main themes can be summarised as follows:

1. Young people are less concerned about the environment than other groups

There is a view that 'young people and the environment' is an issue that needs particular attention because young people are currently not sufficiently engaged with environmental issues.

As is discussed in the first section of this paper, there is evidence that, while young people do see environmental problems as an important concern, they are slightly less concerned than other groups and they do not see environmental issues as a personal priority – hence their environmental 'commitment' might be said to be slightly less than that of other groups. This generalisation is somewhat questionable, as I noted above. However, if it is acknowledged that improving environmental outcomes demands increased awareness and commitment from all members of the community, then the above 'deficit' perspective alone suggests that young people are a group to which specific attention should be paid.

2. Young people will inherit the world's environmental problems

A common rationale for targeting young people on environmental issues is that they will be the generation that inherits existing environmental problems, and face the challenges of addressing them. From this perspective, the views, attitudes and values of young people, both towards environmental issues and towards the possibility of taking action to address them are important because they are likely to be formative of their adult views, behaviours and capabilities. As Connell et al (1999) put it, their outlooks 'may colour the environmental orientations the young people

[16] The other benefit mentioned is that it helps protect children and young people – this is a finding primarily of relevance to organisations that have a direct role in caring for or providing services for children and young people, such as out-of-home care providers.

carry into their adult lives and careers'. For this reason, young people are seen to have enormous potential as a site for intervention – they are society's most potent 'change agents' (Bentley et al).

This perspective draws on a common view of young people, as 'investments in the future' or 'the leaders of tomorrow'. A limitation of this view is that it tends to conceptualise young people only in the future tense, as *becoming* citizens, or as adults in the making. What it often fails to acknowledge is that young people are already active social agents, as discussed in the previous section. However, it does draw attention to the 'disproportionate impact that today's policies will have on young people' (Kester 2002:5).

3. Consumption is a key environmental issue, and young people have a particularly important relationship to consumption

Another reason that has been put forward for targeting young people on the issue of sustainability is their consumption patterns, and their attitude to consumerism (Bentley et al: 2004). Young people are responsible for a sizeable proportion of total consumption expenditure in affluent societies like Australia. They spend much of their money on leisure goods and activities, particularly clothes, food, entertainment and communications equipment (Bentley 2004:28). It has also been argued that young people directly or indirectly influence a large proportion of family consumption (UNESCO and UNEP in Bentley et al 2004: 28).

However, it is not so much the *volume* of young people's consumption that has been seen as significant, (after all, this remains small compared to the expenditure of older age groups), but rather the meanings they attach to it. It is well understood that young people are at a developmental stage at which identify formation is key. They are working out 'who they are' and 'who they want to be'. They are also seeking social inclusion and peer approval. It should come as no surprise that in a society as defined by consumerism as 21st century Australia, one of the main ways that these issues find expression in young people is in relation to what they consume – often manifested as a desire to buy the newest or 'coolest' products on the market. As Bentley et al put it, 'young people establish their own identities through what they buy' (2004:1-2). This is a generalisation of course[17], and Bentley does acknowledge that there are many young people who 'exhibit clear anti-consumerist behaviour', or practice consumption minimising lifestyles. Further, to say that young people define themselves through what they buy is not to suggest that they are unaware of this relationship, or uncritical of it, or that they are naïve about the barrage of marketing that encourages and exploits it, but rather to point out that, this 'treadmill of endless desire' is to some extent, irresistible. It is a cycle that 'many young people understand, resist, critique and mock – but participate in nevertheless' (Pocock and Clarke cited in Bentley et al 2004: 49).

Because of the breadth of environmental issues that are related to consumption, and the relevance it has in young people's lives, sustainable consumption has been identified as a key 'entry point' for engaging young people in environmental issues, and helping them develop an action-orientated approach to sustainability (Bentley et al, 2004:49-50).

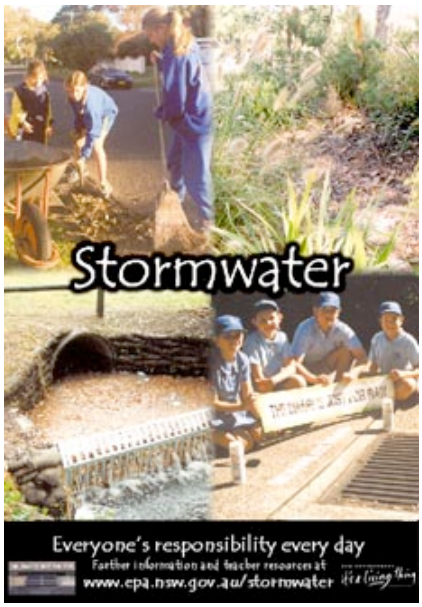
[17] Just as the generalisation does not apply to all young people, it could also be said to be applicable to a good number of adult Australians. Clive Hamilton's work on Australians' 'addiction to consumption', should caution against a view that this phenomenon is peculiar to young people. See Hamilton and Denniss (2005), and Hamilton (2003).

4. Young people have a responsibility to be 'part of the solution'

The question of young people's responsibilities (as distinct from their rights or needs) is worth considering for two reasons. Firstly, it can be invoked in arguments *against* the participation of young people – the idea that they should not have rights until they can take responsibility. Matthews et al contest this view, arguing that it is based on an idealised view of childhood and that in reality few children live without responsibilities (1999: 136). It is also a view of young people that defines them by what they are 'not capable of', rather than by what they *can* do.

Secondly, when it comes to environmental issues, the idea that young people (even very young children) have *responsibilities* is already inherent in numerous environmental education initiatives and school-focussed environmental action campaigns. The image (below) – a poster aimed at school children pointing out that stormwater is 'everyone's responsibility' – is just one example of this.

(below) Department of Environment and Conservation, *Stormwater: Everyone's responsibility every day*, poster included in teaching guide for children in years K-10[18]



Furthermore, young people already recognise their responsibilities towards the environment – many of the comments from young people in studies where they have been surveyed or interviewed clearly illustrate their belief that individuals, including young people, can make a difference, and that it is 'up to everyone' to 'do their bit'. For example, 95 per cent of 12-28 year old respondents to a survey on consumption either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I am responsible for making my consumption more sustainable' (Bentley et al: 39). High school students aged 16-17 interviewed by Connell et al (1999) expressed a similar sense of personal responsibility:

> "I believe it all starts here [pointing to himself]. Even with the smallest things, you have to keep on going and going".
>
> "Everyone can do something, small or big".

[18] Source: http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/stormwater/hsieteachguide/index.htm
Image reprinted with permission from NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change.

Like other people, young people are implicated in environmental problems, their behaviour has an environmental impact and changing it can 'make a difference'. Further, they are already receiving and internalising the message that they have a responsibility to be a part of at least some strategies to address environmental problems. It can be argued that like everyone else, in the face of significant environmental problems, young people have a responsibility to take action, albeit within the limits of their capability.

Conclusion: improving the structures and processes for young people's participation

This paper has argued that there is a case for greater attention to be paid to engaging young people in environmental issues, particularly in a political sense, in relation to environmental policy development and decision-making. The previous section provides a specific rationale for increasing the participation and engagement of young people in environmental issues. However, care must be taken in putting this aim into practice, for poorly conceived structures and processes can be worse than none.

Fortunately there is a growing body of literature and practice in relation to the participation of young people generally, and policy makers, educators and communicators in the environmental field would do well to draw on this in any attempts to tailor participatory strategies to young people. Work in this field is premised upon the idea that young people do want to make a positive difference, have the capacity to do so, and have useful skills to offer, however they may not know how to go about it, and indeed may not think much of the current options for engagement.

In their survey exploring young people's perceptions and experiences of citizenship, Manning and Ryan (2004:3) found that 89 per cent of respondents thought that young people do want to participate in influencing politics and government, and that the mechanisms seen to be most effective for doing this were voting in elections, youth and student representative organisations and community groups. However qualitative findings from focus groups showed that while young people were aware of various opportunities for political participation, they were not confident about the effectiveness of such mechanisms. Many where particularly pessimistic about the ability of young people to effect change through participation. There was however, general agreement that participation at a local level can be effective.

Vromen (2004) argues that the idea that young people are 'apathetic' is one of the common 'political myths' about young people. What is true however is that many young people do not take up existing opportunities to participate. This may be because they are not aware of all the options they have to 'participate' or 'have a say' or be involved in decision making, or they may be aware of the options but not find them convenient, engaging or appropriate. They may also be doubtful or even cynical about their effectiveness (Matthews 2001a, Manning and Ryan 2004). Either way, there is some evidence in the literature that there is a sizeable group of young people who want to participate in influencing politics and government, or at least 'have a say' but do not feel able to or do no know how to go about it (Manning and Ryan 2004, DLG 1998).

What this implies is that organisations have a responsibility to create structures that are accessible by and engaging for young people. Rather than blaming young people for not participating in the established structures and processes, or assuming that this is because they are apathetic, it may be useful to examine the structures and

processes themselves. Existing structures for consultation, or participation in decision-making are not always 'young people friendly'. For example, some Council staff interviewed about youth participation by the NSW Department of Local Government recognised that many of the usual consultation processes used by Councils (such as public exhibition/written submissions and public meetings) 'did not encourage young people to express their views' (DLG 1999). This suggests that engaging more young people in environmental policy development and decision-making may mean rethinking existing 'adult' processes and structures, and working creatively with young people to develop more youth-friendly ones. Conceiving of young people as social agents, and supporting them to engage with environmental issues in new, age-appropriate and more genuinely participatory ways is critical if we are to deliver improved environmental outcomes, for both current and future generations.

[7,491 words + references]

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