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Background

The Green Team* runs one-day and residential opportunities for young people between 14-25 years to participate in environmental activities. These opportunities are run by adult volunteers. The young people carry out environmental tasks for a range of environmental organisations, country parks and land managers. Although advertised to the general public, almost all of the young people who volunteer do so as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Award. The Green Team is also an award provider for the John Muir Award. The Green Team commissioned Volunteer Development Scotland (VDS) to undertake an evaluation which aims to assess whether the environmental opportunities provided by the Green Team change the 'hearts and minds' of young people about environmental issues.

Main Findings

- Green Team opportunities impact positively on young people's behaviour, attitudes, knowledge and skills.
- Learning is a by-product of participation.
- There is enhanced understanding and knowledge about the work that goes into maintaining green spaces.
- Attitudinal shifts centre on an increase in awareness of how individual actions have an accumulative effect
- The young people feel that an increase in their awareness of the cumulative effects of individual actions is likely to have the most impact on their own behaviour.
- There is an increase in the value of team work.
- The opportunity and ability to use tools increase the young people's skills.
- There is evidence to suggest that the residential opportunities have a greater impact on the young people.
- There is evidence to suggest that volunteers with environmental education qualifications have more scope to draw on their experience and impart their knowledge in residential settings.

*Further information on the Green Team is available at: www.greenteam.abel.co.uk

Findings

The aim of the evaluation is to assess whether the environmental opportunities provided by the Green Team change 'hearts and minds' of young people about environmental issues. Objectives include evaluating whether being exposed to environmental education leads to increased knowledge of the environment by the young people; if and whether the young people's increased knowledge of the environment leads to a change in their attitude towards the environment and whether these shifts in attitudes leads to changes in behaviour towards the environment by young people.

Methodology

A dual methodology was employed that undertook participant observation and conducted focus groups with young people at four different events; two residential and two day.

Adult volunteer leaders

The adult volunteer leaders play a key role in the running of the Green Team projects. They take responsibility for the young people over the activity period and are there to facilitate and/or lead the activities undertaken. The formal educational role of the adult volunteers varied from site to site. When the local Ranger is present, it is they that tend to take on the formal educational role during the activities, with the adult volunteer leaders taking more of a facilitative role. Safety is always a high priority. Prior to each activity a safety talk on the purpose and appropriate use of tools was given. Leading and facilitating tends to be done in a non directional manner which makes the young people feel that the leaders are more their peers than adults telling them what to do. The young people appreciated the leaders 'hands on' approach', this underlying feeling of equality helps set the tone of the group. What is particularly striking is the young people's appreciation for the time and effort that the adult volunteer leaders put in to the days/weekends.

The young people

Many of the young people who attend Green Team activities are doing the Duke of Edinburgh or the John Muir Award. Some have been recommended to take part through friends or relatives who have been on previous Green Team opportunities. Most of the young people do not know anyone prior to attending. All had a level of environmental awareness. Their motivations to be there were related to wanting to give/do something constructive, be outdoors and meet new people. Indeed, the social interaction and the outdoor nature of the activities seem to be a key motivator for many.

Knowledge and Skills

Knowledge gained through Green Team activities range from area specific to task specific as well as more generic conservation/environmental knowledge and skills. Knowledge of safe and appropriate use of tools is a key area of learning. Indeed, the opportunity to handle and use tools is particularly valued by the young people. Examples of site specific learning includes learning how to construct steps for public safety; how to install of path drainage, how to dismantle and erect fencing, learning about the impact of dropping litter and the effect of removing litter, clearing a path or helping indigenous species to grow by removing invasive species. There was evidence of an increase in knowledge about wider environmental issues such as an

increased ability to identify plants and trees, an understanding of the local habitat and what factors play a part in habitat loss.

As well as the explicit learning a more implicit learning also takes, one that is a by-product of participation. Examples of implicit learning were hearing about the 'right to view', the history of the sites and the work that went on 'behind the scenes' to keep parks and green spaces accessible and correctly managed.

Values and attitudes

The young people who attend Green Team opportunities feel that their attitudes to the environment have changed as a result of being involved with the Green Team. They feel they have a better appreciation of the work that goes on 'behind the scenes' with regard to how much time and effort goes into maintaining green public spaces, in to limiting the negative impact that people can have on the environment and to make such spaces 'nice' for people to enjoy. Seeing how individual actions such as dropping litter can have an accumulative negative impact on the environment seemed to have an immediate effect on the young people. The young people clearly value the opportunity to work in small groups. The egalitarian co-operative quality that the adult volunteers promote is appreciated. The young people see how working together, taking turns, sharing the load and communicating with one another is how they get the job done with ease and enjoyment. They particularly enjoy rising to the challenge of having a problem to solve or a task that is especially challenging. The benefits and attractions of teamwork seemed already fairly well established amongst many of the young people, however the Green Team ethos and opportunities seem to further enhance this value.

Behaviours

Behaviour change is difficult to measure; however there are some soft indicators of the impact of participation could potentially have. Many of the young people feel they will think more about the impact they may have on the environment as a result of an enhanced understanding of the work that goes into preserving the environment. Through doing something fun but practical there seems to be an inclination to continue participating in this type of activity, a few young people think they will get outdoors more often.

Day vs. Residential opportunities

Those who attend residential events value the extra time to get to know one another better. Socialising, cooking, eating and living together over the weekend affords them the opportunity not only to make friends with other young people but to get to know the adult volunteers better. It seems the ethos of the Green Team is more pervasive on residential opportunities, they also provide a greater variety of activities and sites. All of these aspects were valued by the young people. The only apparent disincentive for young people attending the residential opportunities was that it leaves no time to partake in any other leisure or social activities. None of the young people cited being away from home, meeting new people, being with people they didn't know as being disincentives. The residential events offer a greater opportunity for more informal learning, learning that takes place beyond the time spent in the field. In the evening the adult volunteer leaders facilitate environmental learning through various games and activities. Due to the enhanced opportunity for the young people to interact with the adult volunteers during residential activities, a natural by-product of this interaction is knowledge exchange.

What the young people particularly value about Green Team Opportunities

The young people state that they enjoy being outdoors, working hard, doing something worthwhile, learning new things, problem-solving, meeting new people and completing tasks. They enjoy the team spirit, being allowed to work with the people they had affinity with, having an opportunity to say what were their preferred tasks and the egalitarian relationships they develop with the volunteer leaders. The young people feel a sense of achievement, particularly when there is an element of them solving a problem or making an impact that was clearly and immediately visible.

Room for improvement?

The young people have mixed views on games. Some feel they give them a break from the practical tasks, some feel there are too many and some feel there is not enough variety. Some young people want to choose the games and some feel the adult volunteers aren't always comfortable with the games. Although any awkwardness on the part of the adult volunteers and or the young people soon dissipated once the games got going.

Conclusions

It was clear that Green Team opportunities impact positively on the young people's behaviour, attitudes, knowledge and skills. Learning was a by-product of participation. The young people are often not overtly aware of learning however when prompted it becomes clear they have learnt a lot through participation. The most apparent change in their knowledge base is around an enhanced understanding of the work that goes into maintaining green spaces. This includes an increased ability to identify plants and trees, and understanding of local habitat and what factors play a part in habitat loss. In terms of attitudes the young people have become more aware that individual acts have an accumulative effect and as such they feel that this may impact on their own behaviour. Another attitudinal change in evidence is around the young people having an increase value of team work. In terms of skills, they particularly value the opportunity to handle and use tools and as such their skills in this area increased.

It was striking how much the young people enjoy their time with the Green Team, they value the opportunity to meet new people, to participate in activities and to use tools they would otherwise have little chance of doing. They clearly value being outdoors, doing something that 'made a difference' and seeing the impact of their efforts. They clearly appreciated the time and effort put in by the adult volunteers, they particularly appreciated their egalitarian and caring attitude which fostered a reciprocal congenial and generous atmosphere.

There is some evidence to suggest that the residential opportunities have a greater impact on the young people. This seems largely related to the opportunity to take part in a greater number and variety of activities. It also seems related to the adult volunteers having more opportunity to be in contact with the young people and a natural by-product of this interaction was an increased awareness of environmental issues and the Green Team ethos. The young people particularly liked the residential opportunities because they afforded them more opportunity to get to know one another, to socialise as well as take part in a greater number and variety of activities.

Whether there was any evidence to suggest that volunteers should be trained in environmental education is less convincing. The level and delivery of environmental education varies, it depends on the site, on the activity, on the adult volunteer, whether there is a ranger and whether it is a day or residential opportunity. The young people seem to learn as much when they are with environmental educationalist adult volunteers as when there are not. Perhaps the issue is more about how to maximise the knowledge and skills of volunteers with environmental education qualifications. The residential activities, due to the greater variety of tasks, sites and amount of time spent with the young people seem to offer more scope for adult volunteers who are trained in environmental education to use their skills and impart their knowledge than the day activities.

Recommendations

- To promote Green Team opportunities to young people it may be useful to draw on what the young people who have participated state they enjoy most - being outdoors; using tools; doing something worthwhile; learning new things; problem-solving; meeting new people; completing tasks and feeling a sense of achievement.
- To maximise using the knowledge and skills of volunteers with environmental education qualifications the Green Team may want to communicate this to such volunteers or ask them to volunteer for residential opportunities.
- To increase attendance at residential opportunities it may be useful for the Green Team to draw on the aspects found to be the most enjoyable by the young people - meeting and getting to know new people, socialising through outdoor activities 'the camping out' feel, doing something different from the norm and emphasising that it is only one weekend out of many.
- A greater variety of games and more opportunity for the young people to choose and lead the games.
- To consider ways of promoting Green Team opportunities to young people not already involved in community service.

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