

## More than Sweat Equity: Young People as Volunteers in Conservation Work

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### Abstract

This paper examines how young people come to be enrolled and engaged in programmes of unpaid environmental conservation in rural areas. Set within a theoretical debate regarding the nature of unpaid work and its relationship to voluntary and coercive forms of environmental action, the paper identifies four pathways and two types of recipient organisations through which young people become involved in efforts to protect and enhance rural landscapes and locales. Drawing on a combination of extended survey and in-depth qualitative research in the west and south of rural England, the paper considers the systems of governance that surround the organisation of these unpaid activities and shows how these are rationalised and designed as practical and embodied experiences of citizenship. The paper argues that enhancing participation rests less on how to foster more

young participants into the conservation sector than how to structure these activities in more productive ways that go beyond simple ‘sweat equity’. The findings have implications for the training and organisation of volunteers in other sectors.

## 1.0: Introduction

In austere times, questions about the relationship between the state, localities, and the delivery of assorted public services – whether social or environmental – are of increasing importance to the UK’s voluntary and conservation sectors (Dean, 2015, Devictor et al., 2010, Jones et al., 2016, Kirsop-Taylor, 2019, Milbourne and Cushman, 2015, Pagès et al., 2019) This paper builds on contemporary literatures on volunteering (Bonnesen, 2018, Davies et al., 2018, Dean, 2014, Holdsworth and Brewis, 2014, Sloane and Pröbstl-Haider, 2019) by exploring how voluntary work in environmental conservation<sup>1</sup> functions as one means by which extrinsic state and non-state concerns for the environment, the rural economy, sustainability, and concern for young people are meshed together with individual interests, aspirations and circumstances (cf. Jessen, 2019).

In this paper we identify, and critically examine, the variegated systems of choice, obligation, and mandate that underpin young people’s ‘voluntary’ pathways to unpaid conservation work. We explore how different types of organisations (i.e. from passive recipients to enabling hosts) structure and organise volunteering activities and we assess the resulting impact on experiences and outcomes for young people. In so doing, we expose

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<sup>1</sup> We interpret ‘environmental conservation’ as maintenance, protection, preservation, creation and enhancement, covering diverse pursuits including species identification and surveying, soil and water testing, habitat restoration, maintaining footpaths and hedgerows, digging out ponds and pollarding trees.

the interplay between what volunteering practically involves, on what terms, and for what reason. We assert that understanding pathways and host organisation types is vital for effectively engaging and deploying volunteers, but equally for the sustainability of volunteering as a way of caring for the rural environment. Our key argument is that volunteers must be seen as more than a simple form of 'sweat equity' – i.e. a source of unpaid labour and toil that is mandated or conscripted rather than offered freely in the way that voluntary work is commonly understood – if they are also to reap the much-vaunted gains in personal wellbeing, health, and satisfaction that volunteering promises. Our findings on environmental volunteering therefore have wider implications for understanding the pathways, motivations, and practical contribution of volunteers in a range of sectors from conservation to health and social care.

We introduce briefly the policy and empirical context of our work before discussing some of the main theoretical issues and policy discourses that underpin the characterisation of unpaid environmental action as form of voluntary work. This provides the basis for exploring two thematic areas of analysis. First, we present an empirically-grounded framework for understanding how young people come to be enrolled in environmental conservation activities, teasing out the coercive and non-coercive nature of participation. We then consider the terms on which these activities are structured, governed and enacted by environmental organisations, often by working in partnership with wider community actors. In the concluding section, we assess the implications of these modalities of unpaid engagement for the real and imagined experiences of young people in rural areas. We advance the idea of 'sweat equity' as a way of thinking about, and critically examining, the need for greater reciprocity between the natural and the social relations of environmental

conservation. We also consider the wider implications of our findings for other sectors in which volunteering is increasingly promoted as a panacea to cuts in public service funding.

## 2.0: Environmental Conservation and Rural Sustainability

Any examination of young people's volunteering in environmental conservation, though of relevance to the wider voluntary sector, must also be attentive to the place of conservation in rural policy, society, and economy in the UK. With a long history including the National Trust, Duke of Edinburgh awards and the renamed British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (now TCV), environmental conservation continues to be a substantive, as well as symbolically important, policy aspiration for the UK's rural areas, most recently embodied in the Lawton Report (2010) 'Making Space for Nature' and the Natural Environment White Paper (DEFRA, 2011). Environmental conservation's formative placement in rural policy reflected a concern to reverse and restrict losses to habitat and wildlife, and secure iconic landscapes (Osborn, 1997, Sheail, 1998). Today it belongs within a more complex, ambitious narrative of 'sustainable rural development' and 'community resilience' (Scott, 2013, Tovey, 2016, Wilson, 2010). Post- or non-productivism and multi-functionality represent theoretical frameworks which have developed to make sense of this (Marsden, 1998, Ward, 1993, Wilson, 2010). A large body of work seeks to grasp how the post-war UK land economy – based around expanding productive capacity and assured market for commodities – is being fundamentally and decisively transformed (see especially; Evans et al., 2002, Mather et al., 2006, Walford, 2003, Wilson, 2007). These questions are even more pressing in light of the imminent departure of the UK from the EU.

In keeping with a “rural development paradigm” (Ploeg et al., 2000) which strives for synergistic relationships between environmental and economic concerns in the name of rural (read ‘agricultural’) ‘multifunctionality’ (e.g. Marsden and Sonnino, 2008, Kitchen and Marsden, 2009), conservation’s place within sustainable rural development is primarily bound up with questions about economic viability reflected in discussions about the actions of market and the state and *paid* occupations across land-based industries. However, transition to a post-productivist countryside has increased the type and number of actors involved in environmental conservation and stewardship to include state agencies (e.g. Environment Agency, Natural England), the public sector, individuals, special interest groups and – the focus of this paper – the third sector (e.g. Wildlife Trusts, National Trust, Rivers Trusts, *inter alia*) (Bennett et al., 2018, Pagès et al., 2019). The delivery of community and conservation work for a regenerative countryside is now being choreographed through unpaid, non-professionalized, commitments of time and labour – that is, ‘volunteering’ (Rochester et al., 2016, Wallington and Lawrence, 2008,).

This shift has been accelerated in the UK and Western democracies through the enactment of austerity measures post the financial crisis of 2007/08 (Ramesh, 2009). Joseph and Skinner (2012) have argued that state processes of divestment from rural economies have resulted in a culture of ‘substitution’ from institutional provision of local community needs to communities and household identifying and providing services for themselves (Herbert-Cheshire, 2000, Skinner, 2008).

Central to the then Conservative Government’s vision of a Big Society in 2008 was the belief that a participatory citizen can be mobilised as a panacea to identify and solve social

problems (Macmillan, 2013, Mohan, 2011, Jones et al., 2016, Healey and Jones, 2016). This is especially so among rural development programs – such as the youth service and elderly care – where the service provision models have shifted (Skinner, 2008, Wallington and Lawrence, 2008) with an increased reliance on volunteers (Davies et al., 2018, Hanlon and Skinner, 2015). However, Lister (2015) and Warren and Smalley (2014) suggest that conservation-focused voluntary philanthropy under the banner of the ‘Big Green Society’ (Bell and Vanner, 2011, Cook and Inman, 2012) is not a new concept. Political and ideological debates on the potential for voluntarism to resolve the ‘deficit-gap’ between the provision of social services and dwindling public sector budgets has a much longer history (Blyth, 2013, Milligan, 2007, Lister, 2015). Nevertheless, the most current voluntary turn advocates the substitution of ‘soft’ services, such as youth or environmental work, from the state to the voluntary/3<sup>rd</sup> sector, regardless of whether or not those services are capable of meeting these new demands. Significantly, volunteering activities are no longer ‘in addition’ to state services but rather an instrument of state provision *per se*.

In addition to this process of substitution is a new emphasis on volunteers themselves, as responsabilised individuals whose active citizenship is a product of environmental ethics (Conradson, 2005), ethics of care (Milligan and Wiles 2010) and norms of trust and reciprocity (Strickland, 2010). However, the motivations for, processes of and experiences and meanings generated through voluntary activity for both individuals and groups remain relatively under-researched.

In what follows, we explore how these changes in the voluntary sector combined with new moral and political framings of rural community development have combined to create

regenerative rural spaces that attempt to fulfil the needs of both young people and conservation policy. It is widely recognised that rural policy makers must navigate their way through a litany of difficult, seemingly intractable, issues and a raft of different, if mutually reinforcing, national platforms for youth development in the UK, when seeking to create rural spaces where young people, residing both within and beyond the countryside, not only see a future for themselves within rural areas, but enact roles and identities that are empowering of both self and community (Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2017).

### 3.0: Voluntary Work and Environmental Conservation

Voluntary activities are central to the reproduction of the conservation sector – its identity, values, and viability – and its practical work, for example, through the collection of botanical specimens and monitoring of fauna (O’Brien et al., 2010, Sloane and Pröbstl-Haider, 2019). Amateur naturalist groups and enthusiasts were instrumental in institutionalizing and popularising conservation goals during the early- to mid-twentieth century (Sheil 1998). The most recent JNCC data available from 2014 shows that 7,300,875 hours of volunteering were undertaken in 13 UK conservation charities and public bodies. More specifically, in 2014-15 the UK’s Conservation Trust for Volunteers (TCV), a charity providing voluntary activity for young people, worked with 10,941 regular volunteers on 1,996 sites, delivering 151,882 volunteer workdays and 911,292 volunteer hours. In 2014-15 TCV Employment and Training Services helped 1,100 people into sustainable jobs and 900 people increase their skills (The-Conservation-Volunteers, 2015).

That these activities tend to be provided through partnerships between the public sector and a vast network of environmental and youth facing organisations in the third sector is

significant for they speak directly to wider debates about what might constitute a viable 'community'. The Homes and Communities Agency (an NGO replaced in 2018 by Homes England) positioned environmental conservation as a demonstrative facet of sustainable 'place making' (ODPM, 2004). Voluntary, charitable, and public service activity are central to the means and ends of community reproduction, a quality clearly promoted by TCV in their Community Involvement and Development programmes (The-Conservation-Volunteers, 2015). Further, state platforms for youth development in the UK have centred on enacting a national framework for youth action and engagement designed to deliver a step change "in the diversity, quality and quantity of young peoples' volunteering" (Russell, 2005: 1).

At the heart of this work is the idea that volunteering is a fundamentally transformative set of activities; not only opening up individual life chances through learning and boosting self-esteem and confidence but generative of material benefits to society as a whole – a prescription embodied in the Giving White Paper (CO, 2011). In practical terms, this national policy discourse has resulted in two major initiatives. First, the setting up in 2006 of the dedicated youth volunteering charity vInspired (formerly V) – effectively a gateway for promoting volunteering opportunities to young people. Since its launch, vInspired states that it has delivered 1.25 million volunteering opportunities for 14-25 year olds across England (<https://vinspired.com/>, 2016). Second, the launch of the National Citizen Service (NCS), which has provided more than 300,00 young people with volunteering opportunities since it was piloted in 2011 (Booth et al., 2014, Panayiotou et al., 2017).

The outcome of this policy discourse is to position rural areas as major venues for voluntary conservation activities, a stage upon which mutually reinforcing relations between the social

and natural can occur: at one and the same time servicing the material needs of environmental conservation and creating active citizens (Measham and Barnett, 2008, Rose et al. 2018). This relationship was explicated in the natural environment White Paper, *The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature* (HMSO 2011: 53), which stated that “Volunteering is one of the most fulfilling ways to experience the natural world. It can also help people develop new skills, solve local problems and develop a sense of local ownership and responsibility”. Indeed, it has been documented that participation in volunteering shapes individual subjectivity; yet it also materially shapes places, and the cultural forms created with(in) places (Warren 2014).

The White Paper also provided the segue between volunteering, the natural environment and economic regeneration, noting that “a healthy, properly functioning natural environment is the foundation of sustained economic growth, prospering communities and personal wellbeing” (HMSO 2011: 3). In the context of economic regeneration, environmental conservation volunteers may help to produce the very capabilities and inclinations necessary for rural areas to innovate within their changing circumstances. Indeed, managing the countryside for the purposes of environmental sustainability is an important priority that may align new skills and knowledges with new professional norms and standards. Unpaid environmental conservation work may have a measurable effect not only on the environmental health and well-being of rural areas, but also on its social fabric and economic prosperity. But to harness this potential, we need to understand what volunteering is and whether current conceptions help us to grasp the nature, value and importance of unpaid work in environmental conservation – or indeed any sector which seeks to mobilise volunteers.

To explore this, we draw on the foundational work into volunteering undertaken by the sociologist Robert Sebbins (Stebbins, 1992, 2000, 2009, 2013) who has sought to critique definitions of volunteering that attend only to what it is not: a form of civil labour taking place in the “absence of payment, in money or kind” (Sebbins 2009: 155). For Sebbins, volunteering is therefore a form of civil labour undertaken with a “felt absence of coercion, moral or otherwise” and that, “if obligations exist, they are felt to be agreeable” (2009: 155). Individuals accrue non-material rewards, such as the experience of pleasure, learning, self-esteem and worth<sup>2</sup>. It is for this reason that Sebbins (Stebbins, 2000, Stebbins and Graham, 2004) and others (Orr, 2006, Misener et al, 2010) argue that volunteering should best be regarded as from of ‘serious’ leisure. Dean (2014) goes further to suggest that volunteering is nothing more than a commodity, packaged, branded and ‘sold’ to individuals, especially young people, who in turn consume the volunteering experience for instrumental reasons such as developing their skills set and their résumé. This has been theorized by Brown et al’s work (Brown et al., 2003, Brown, 1995) as the ‘economy of experience’ and by Holdsworth (2017) as a ‘cult of experience’. More critically, Mills and Waite (2017) discuss how the NCS is an attempt by the UK Government to create and mould active citizens in precarious economic times through boosting skills and CV’s, resulting in transition to a ‘successful adulthood’ for young people trying to overcome precarious employment challenges posed by society (Mills and Waite, 2017, Heath, 2007, Jardim and Marques da Silva, 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, these non-material returns are identified as gains in physical and mental health, wellbeing, and skills – see for example The Conservation Volunteers’ report (2014) on the impact of volunteering.

Volunteering can be casual or fleeting in style, such as periodic involvement in an environmental project, but also encompasses so called “career volunteering” or “serious leisure”, namely: “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling and where, in the typical case, participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (Stebbins, 1992: 3). This is precisely the type of volunteering that Sheail (1998) argued was so instrumental to the formation of the nature conservation movement.

Stebbins also argues that, in policy definitions, volunteering is celebrated as an activity motivated towards a wider civil purpose, goal or cause. The National Commission for Youth Volunteering in the UK describes this activity as the “giving of unpaid help... [ ]... to benefit other people and the environment in which they live” (Russell, 2005: 14). In other words, volunteering is an activity defined by a sense of service contributing to a public good by undertaking a selfless and altruistic act – a set of qualities clearly endorsed by the Giving White Paper (2011). Volunteering is increasingly described as providing a form of ‘social capital’ through ‘social action’ (Milligan, 2007). It is underpinning what Stebbins (2009: 158) describes as: “the community-wide set of connections among individual participants manifested in the formation of groups, trust, social networks, acts of reciprocity, and the like. Such capital helps communities pursue their common interests, as members pull together to reach shared goals”.

In the following section we explore how young people participate in environmental volunteering, and challenge the conventional wisdom of volunteering as simple altruism

and/or the consumption of instrumental practices. Our research shows that young environmental volunteers are often treated as a form of sweat equity: that is, the investment of 'toil' in a project, where young people are seen to invest their labour when they have nothing else to invest, especially financial capital. However, we suggest that treating volunteering as sweat equity alone does not recognise that there needs to be a reciprocity between the toiler and the organiser of the toil. Indeed, the non-monetary rewards from volunteering in extraordinary places such as National Parks and iconic landscapes arise from an often uneven set of transactions between volunteer, organisation, and the environment (Warren, 2014).

This is especially true in a period of financial austerity when the investment of volunteers in the delivery of public services, environmental projects, and other services is noted as being of particular importance. Such reciprocity involves recognising and valuing the volunteer for themselves as an individual with particular skills, attributes and motivations rather than treating them as a homogenous group of people who turn up and perform tasks on behalf of an organisation. Reciprocity also means investing in individuals and enlisting their skills as well as training them, giving them ownership over some aspects of their activity, and ensuring that they are mentored, perhaps even nurtured.

#### 4.0: About the Study

This paper draws on research conducted in the UK in the rural counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, and Somerset. These were chosen to provide an illustrative and distinctive mix of landscape contexts. The study

uses a qualitative methodology, soliciting the views of 115 organisations/groups over the lifetime of the project. We conducted an extensive structured online and postal survey of environmental organisations and groups offering opportunities for unpaid environmental conservation in rural areas which drew 82 responses from invitations to 273 environmental organizations/groups (30% response rate). 46 depth interviews were conducted with environmental conservation sector, community organisations, schools and social services responsible for the design and delivery of programmes of work across community and environmental networks. Finally, a combination of one-to-one interviews and focus groups were employed to solicit the views of 68 young people aged 14-25, including participants and non-participants in environmental conservation activities.

All responses have been anonymised in accordance with the agreement of the interviewees. The data was analysed in three distinct phases using a generalised inductive approach to evaluating qualitative data (cf. Thomas, 2006). First, raw interview and questionnaire data was condensed into key themes. Second, we established connections between the research objectives and the findings derived from the data. Finally, we developed a framework of the underlying processes in the data. By adopting this approach, we were able to identify four pathways into environmental volunteering for young people – self-motivated, cajoled, mandated and needy – and two dominant types of environmental organisations working with young people: passive and enabling. In the following sections we discuss how young people experience environmental volunteering and how organisations provide and adapt for this demand.

## 5.0: Pathways to Youth Participation in Rural Environmental Volunteering

Our analysis revealed four pathways young people enter environmental volunteering and two types of recipient organisations with particular characteristics (see Figure 1). We explicate these pathways through examining the identity, motivations, and expectations of young people entering environmental volunteering. We then show how different pathways and organisation type result in differing experiences and outcomes for young people. Specifically, we expose the interplay between what volunteering practically involves (i.e. unpaid labour), on what terms (i.e. time free of disagreeable obligation) and for what reason (i.e. iterations of personal pleasure, altruism, and the public good). Throughout the discussion we employ the heuristic of ‘sweat equity’ to understand how young people come to be structured and organised into environmental volunteering activities, as well as how those activities are delivered in practice.

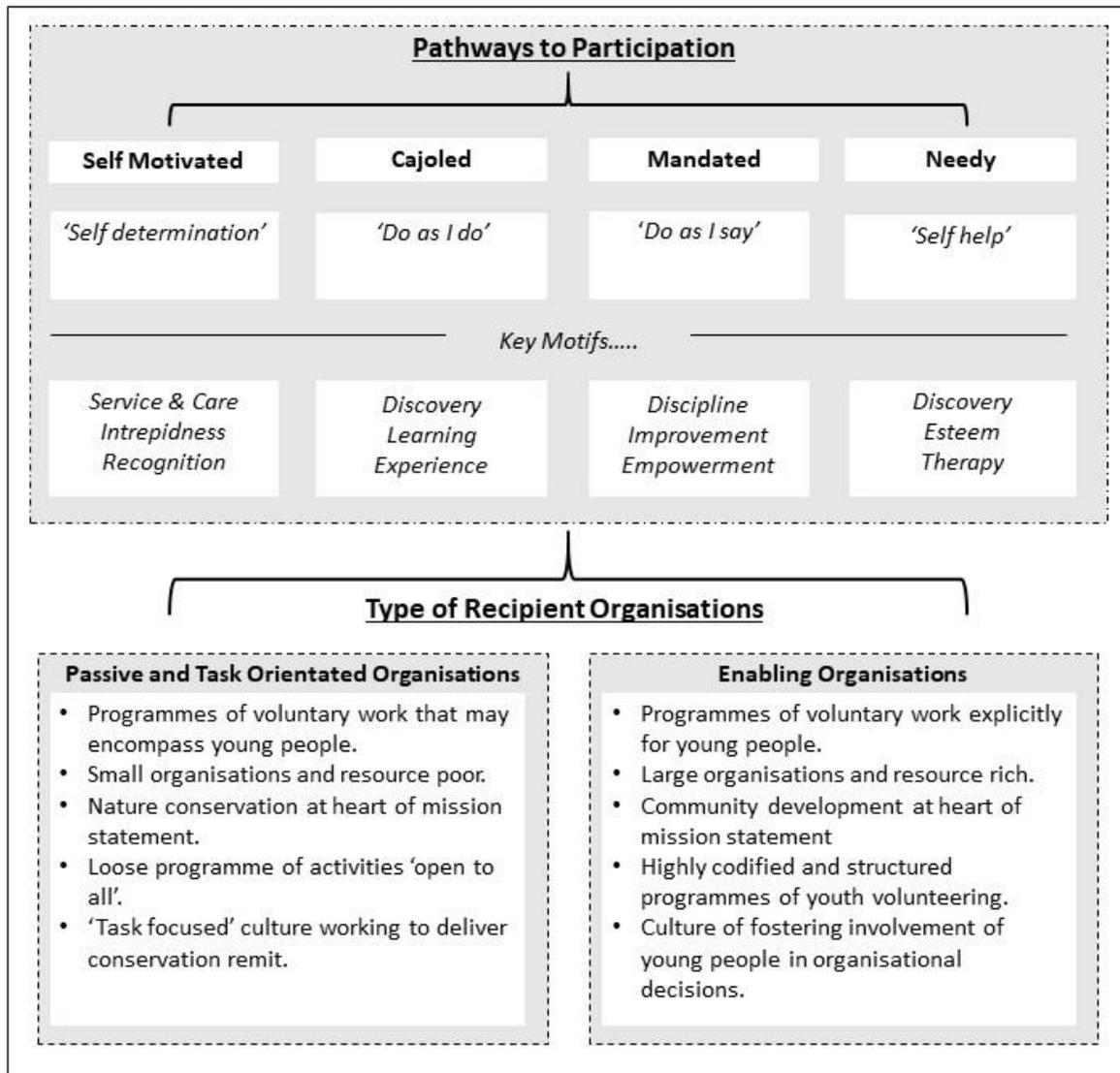


Figure 1: Youth participation in environmental conservation: pathways, identities and types of recipient organisations

First, there are *self-motivated* pathways to conservation, a mode of engagement in which individuals purposefully seek out opportunities to undertake unpaid work. At one level, this arises out of an interest in nature and wildlife which is framed, to some degree, in terms of an ethic of 'duty', 'care' and 'service'. More commonly, though, it is the physical, experiential and aspirational benefits of participation that matter most. For example, participation can be routed in the idea of getting fit, an idea that is actively propagated through the marketing strategies of large conservation organisation (such as the provision

of so called 'green gyms' by TCV) (Birch, 2005, Pretty et al., 2007). In experiential terms, participation is closely associated with 'fun' and 'intrepidness' in the great outdoors, set against the interiority and mundanity of work/school time. Involvement may occur through direct participation with specific environmental groups or organizations such as a wildlife trust or nature reserve, or through youth networks that have exclusive remits for conservation, for instance TCV. More generally, experiential participation is initiated through a (non-environmental) youth and community organisation, such as the Scouting Association or the Duke of Edinburgh Award. In these cases, fun and intrepidness are closely aligned with 'badge earning' as an external marker of esteem, skill and citizenship. The National Citizen Service, for example, includes a week at an outdoor activity centre and a social action project which are rewarded with a certificate signed by the Prime Minister.

External markers of achievement like badges, certificates, or qualifications are themselves part of a wider process in which unpaid conservation is linked to longer term aspirations. Badges and certificates are utilised in applications for further and higher education courses, whether or not the applicants' interests lie in conservation. In turn, students undertaking programmes of study in conservation-related topics provide a steady source of unpaid labour as they seek to find applied experience either as a formal part of their course or to boost their CV. Indeed, volunteering is a tactical way of building a résumé. For those with strong interests in pursuing a paid career in the conservation sector it is clear these commitments of unpaid time are regarded as a fundamentally important to securing 'prized' occupations. To some extent this is about aligning 'serious leisure' interests with career plans. For instance, Frank, an environmentalist working for a rural education centre, spoke of a girl who "came on a regular basis [she was] very interested in wildlife and ...wants to be

a wildlife TV Presenter, so high aspirations, but very driven as well” (Interview 3751). However, these career-focused investments caution us to resist simple associations between self-motivation and volunteerism. An important running theme through aspirational discourses is the tacitly coercive nature of voluntary conservation, with individuals being seen to be “doing their time” (Mark, youth worker, Interview 3754), or as Dean (2015: 145) implies, “young people are encouraged to consume volunteering as without it, they cannot move up or move on”.

The second pathway to participation is what we term *cajoling*, a weak form of coercion whereby individuals are encouraged or ‘nudged’ into unpaid environmental conservation through the deeds of others. This was identified by organisations and groups as a significant pathway to participation. Cajoling can occur through an informal ‘do as I do’ logic, perhaps through older family members’ involvement in volunteering. Such intergenerational cajoling is often shaped by a parental notion of the value of ‘joining in’ or ‘discovering’ an activity:

Parents or grandparents open that door for them; that’s definitely a major route; [one of our participants] is about fifteen, sixteen sort of going into GCSE’s, didn’t really know what he wanted, his mum came along and.. said “oh give this a go”, he didn’t have a clue, he came along for a day, with his mate ...had a brilliant time, came back sort of four or five times later (Tom, Conservation Officer, Interview 3755).

As this interviewee suggests, one downstream effect of intergenerational cajoling is that it binds other young people in to activities through their peers, building of social capital

through creating and maintaining friendships and earning respect (Mohan and Mohan, 2002).

At the same time cajoling can occur through a more formal and structured process of encouragement whereby individuals – typically those with paid community and youth development roles – visit classrooms and assemblies in order to promote voluntary conservations as a viable free time pursuit and/or a tool for personal empowerment and building self-esteem. But they also hope that schools will ‘hand pick’ potential participants: “We go to the schools and say, this is who we are and this is what we offer, do you have a group of young people in say Year 10 who would be interested in coming out” (Mark, Youth Worker, Upland Skills Project, Interview 3754). These activities are aimed particularly at individuals who are ‘not in education, employment or training’ (so called ‘NEETS’). In a direct inversion of the idea of self-motivation, the logic is that individuals need to be “pulled out of the woodwork” to realise their potential:

they don’t really want to do anything. So it is kind of challenging at that mentality and getting them to a point where you know where we can do something and say, look you need to do something with your life; do you want to come and get onto one of these projects? (Fraser, Conservation and Heritage Manager, Interview 3753).

Third, participation can occur through *mandate*, a stronger style of coercion in which individuals are expected or required to participate in unpaid conservation activities. The idea of the mandate rests on a ‘do as I say’ logic (rather than ‘do as I do’) and formal

authority. When volunteering by mandate, some individuals find an outlet for interests and enthusiasms but more reluctant individuals find themselves structured into activities as part of curriculum activity. There are also those who have fallen out of mainstream education and find themselves undertaking voluntary work as part of an 'alternative' curriculum (Brooks, 2004). These are individuals who tend to be defined by schools as 'problematic' because they are seemingly unable to engage in conventional academic learning and/or are disruptive to other pupils' learning. As one youth worker in the South Midlands suggested, there is the assumption that "these are young people who are not going to be high achievers. These are the ones with the reputation in school for being the 'thickos' or whatever" (Jane, Youth Worker, Interview 3788). Thus 'problem' students are often directed towards conservation activities as means of controlling/getting rid of them. Because these are individuals who are deemed at risk of becoming 'NEETS', these alternative curriculum activities are often run by youth workers. However, as David (2014) has noted, mandated pathways to participation can also be underpinned by more progressive empowerment remits, often leading to an uneasy alliance of interests, as these observations from Mark (Youth Worker, Upland Skills Project, Interview 3754) illustrates:

[The school] used to view us as a babysitting service. You know, some schools would see it as 'these are young people, shit, we can't cope with them in school, behavioural issues, get them out... here is a project'.... [That way] they are not excluding the young people. It keeps their [exclusion] figures down because the young people are staying in school... send them out ... [to the national park]... for one day a week"... [So]... are they focusing on 'there is that group there who are really kicking off in school, shit let's

find something to do'? Or are they thinking 'Okay this is an environmental project and it is something different for them to do so we will offer it?'

As Julie, a Senior Youth Worker in Somerset (Interview 3781) explained, tensions exist between youth workers and schools, especially in terms of the sanctions that might apply to students who do not attend:

So there is a sort of tightrope if you like with working with the school groups, and some of our staff handle it better than others. Some of our staff, they do say 'well actually is this real youth work? Because they're not coming along voluntarily', they're almost made to come out and they get detentions if they don't turn up.

This interplay between punishment and empowerment finds its strongest expression in the participation of those who have committed criminal offences. In these cases, youth services and organisations interact closely with the wider criminal justice system, particularly over issues of probation and community service. These "guys on tags" as Fraser (Conservation and Heritage Manager, Interview 3753) called them, are an important source of unpaid conservation work in their own right (Nichols and King, 1998).

Fourth and finally, we also identified what we term a pathway of *care*, a mode of engagement aimed at the physically and/or learning disabled and those with specific mental health needs, such as individuals on drug and drink rehabilitation programmes (cf. Wilton and DeVerteuil, 2006). In these cases, environmental groups and organisation work in partnership with charitable 'self-help' organisations but also through the formal care

networks of social services. This work is strongly entwined with ideas of personal empowerment and the restorative effects of therapeutic landscapes (Bell et al. 2017) and bears some similarities with empowerment discourses of youth services. The difference here is that individuals are not cajoled into activities, but actively structured into them through a mandate of 'need'.

### 6.0: Task-based volunteering and the passive recipient organisation

Despite these variegated pathways to involvement in environmental conservation, it is telling that less than a quarter of environmental groups and organisations in our research specially designed activities with the needs of young people in mind or engaged in recruitment strategies that were targeted directly at youth involvement. For the majority of smaller environmental groups and organisations, particularly those with tightly defined nature conservation remits, a commonly asserted principle was that activities were simply 'open to all', and therefore the involvement of anybody would be welcome. The suggestion that young people 'ought', somehow, to be made provision for baffled respondents in organisations. As Lucy (Interview 3572), an organiser of volunteer activities in a small conservation organisation, wrote: "Young people apply to be volunteers in exactly the same way that older people do. WHY we should make special efforts to accommodate young people in our activities?...[ ]... [m]y organisation is task-focussed" (respondent's emphasis).

It is worth reflecting briefly on what is being implied by being 'task focused' for it clarifies where priorities for most organisations lie (Robinson and Tamir, 2011). According to Ingold (2002), tasks can best be understood as socially embedded activities governed by a particular need, objective or purpose. In other words, for an activity to be a considered a

task it needs to be both *product* and *process*, with the former importantly structuring the meaning of the latter. In the context of the responses above, 'product' is taken to mean a set of environmental outcomes (e.g. a hedge, a tree, a pond and so forth), the material results of a 'process' performed through codified and uncoded sets of skills, knowledges and competencies (e.g. laying, digging and planting). When smaller environmental groups and organisations characterise their work in terms of a 'task' they are implying that volunteering is governed first and foremost by an underpinning environmental purpose, and that this should drive modalities of involvement. It was not unusual for these many smaller organisations and groups to lament a lack of involvement of young people because it implied no abiding interest in the object of organisational/ group concern, (i.e. the product) with its consequent implications for the future viability of the organisation (i.e. the process).

Many within these task-oriented worlds pointed, rather self depreciatingly, to the ageing and male dominated profile of their volunteers. A key environmental worker, Jo (Interview 3772) in a small community run hedge-laying group commented: "no disrespect [but the organisation] is narrow in its volunteer base involving predominately white retired gentleman". They also often reasoned that if participation was weak it was because environmental conservation was beset with a fusty image, one governed by the idea of the amateur naturalist, seemingly obsessed with monitoring and recording nature. As Jo (Ibid.) went on to surmise, "It's a little bit too *Bill Oddie*<sup>3</sup> orientated". This is because these task-based worlds are very much governed by the idea of 'career volunteering', often in the form of "busy work" for the retired and the unemployed, and this, as respondents acknowledged,

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<sup>3</sup> A popular 'nature watcher' on British television.

overlooks needs and appetites of young people. Even so, there is sometimes defensiveness about this worldview. Some respondents who interpreted our questioning as a normative appeal to young people claimed they had neither the resources nor inclination to set up and run “youth clubs”. This represents a quite explicit derogation of the idea that an unwanted set of social relations, a feral and unruly youth, might start to overrun the delivery of objectives (Leyshon 2008): that the very meaning of the *task* might start to be inverted: “we are not social workers, we are not youth workers and these kids...[might]... come along and smoke and...[ ]....cause trouble” (Hannah, National Trust Ranger, Interview 3774).

Despite the absence of specific youth-facing programmes or recruitment campaigns, young people do volunteer for task-focussed groups and consider environmental conservation as a process through which a range of competencies and values might arise in the context of participation. In line with Smith et al’s (2010) observations, many young people in our study pointed keenly to the way in which a sense of co-operation and team work is cultivated in the performance of tasks, and valorise the informality and uncodified way in which practical environmental skills, such as how to coppice a tree, are transmitted from experienced volunteers to novices. A running theme through our data was that voluntary conservation cultivated in individuals the need for care, judgment, and dexterity in relation to nature, a common expression of what it means to engage in a skilled practice (Ingold, 2002).

Nonetheless, what we term as ‘task-based’ organisations tend to be passive recipients of self-motivated volunteers, and do very little to formally codify benefits other than to provide a context in which badges can be earned, CVs built, and school and college projects undertaken.

Importantly, the ‘task-based’ focus that elides the specific needs of young volunteers also extends to those with well-development platforms for unpaid conservation. The existence of significant ‘ready-made’ communities of volunteers on which larger environment organisations can draw diminishes the need to think creatively, or indeed, pro-actively about the terms on which different types of people are recruited. As Dawn – ‘a volunteer coordinator’ of a nationally active environmental organisation – suggested:

We don’t have much of an active [youth] recruitment strategy in as much as that we just have volunteers falling out of our ears and we don’t need to...for the most part we get an awful lot of people just approach us just saying can we volunteer, can we volunteer, *can we volunteer!?*” ... It can make us quite lazy in making a kind of more, I mean we are very keen on ensuring, of involving a wide range of people and a representative demographic, but I think some of the more higher up managers are not that bothered about that because we are *achieving our objectives*” [authors’ emphasis] (Interview, 3784).

In other words, the scale and reach of the organisation may be different, but what matters here is the same: the realisation of environmental ‘product’. For wider community networks seeking to engage young people into volunteering in a proactive and thoughtful way there are evident tensions here. Most of these networks gravitate towards larger environmental organisations which often happily oblige in providing opportunities – but activities are often orientated towards low priority ‘sweat-driven’ activities. Young people cajoled or mandated into these activities often recognised and articulated the fine line between their active or

conscripted participation in 'volunteering'. This was discussed by one in-depth discussion group of young people who had been 'volunteering' in a National Park:

G1 They (National Park) don't know what the hell they're talking about.

G2 (more laughter) I'm in year twelve and like the National Park had to restore their paths, and us mugs had to pay to put chip wood along a bloody path, and it was soaking wet and freezing cold and ...

G3 You're like 16, 17, and they expect you to carry a massive bag of wood, up this really steep hill and to walk back down again.

G2 And then go back and get another one.

G3 Slave labour.

*All agree.*

G2 The knowledge we get from it is how to carry wood.

G1 How to lay a path in a flat line, (laugh), in a straight line, but who needs that? (Interview, 3988).

What is also noticeable from this exchange is the way programmes of volunteering driven by youth networks often tend reinforce a task-orientated worldview. This is in part because an important strand of youth work is to cultivate personal and emotional skills among 'at risk' groups through a sense of personal achievement. But this can come with an inherent indifference to what the work of conservation might practically involve. Fraser, Conservation and Heritage Manager (Interview, 3753) commented that:

...as an organisation, we are more of a *relational* kind of organisation than task-orientated so the idea for us really is not necessarily the end product of the work but so the effect it has on young people if you know what I mean?

Julie (Senior Youth Worker, Interview 3781) also observed:

What they learn in the way of rural skills is by-the-by really, they might be able to put a couple of stones on a wall, but the more important part is it's about them being involved ....to me it's not so much about that they've chopped a tree down and made a path a bit clearer, it's all the knock on effect.

For others though, it was the cultivation of precise sets of rural skills and knowledges that was important. As one individual from a large environmental organisation argued, it was disappointing to say young volunteers: “‘go dig over there and I will dig over here and see you at lunchtime’. You know it is not really what we want the environmental experience to be about” (Hannah, NT Ranger, Interview 3774). Many youth officers and workers leading these projects also felt ill-equipped to manage environmental projects as basis for practical training in environment skills:

I knew some facts about the environmental stuff but it wasn't my field. It used to do my nut in. ...It is very tricky particularly for me because it was quite mad coming into it because I had no background in environmental work you know.... we had a group who wanted to do dry stone walling ...Now I am no dry stone waller at all, I know enough to do the basics with a group and for them to get something out of it and show then the dry stone walling but if you look at the detail of it..... (William, Youth Worker, Interview, 3771)

A picture emerged in our research of youth networks slotting into these task-orientated worlds with limited capacity, and indeed sometimes small inclination, to develop conservation activities as context in which practical and applied skills could be acquired and learnt.

## 7.0: Youth volunteering and the enabling organisation

Formal programmes of youth volunteering within environmental conservation tend to be concentrated in a small number of generally large, resource rich, organisations where community development features strongly in mission statements and highly codified and structured programmes of youth volunteering are in place. In many cases, individuals are employed within these organisations specifically in community development roles. As Holdsworth and Brewis (2014) argue, volunteering, once an activity conceived of as 'extra-curricular', has in fact become 'co-curricular' between organisations and schools/communities. Self-motivated volunteers are absorbed into different styles of unpaid conservation in these organisations. Indeed, higher achieving students increasingly take on substantial volunteering to combat the realisation that academic qualifications are no longer enough to gain employment. But these environmental organisations are also targeted as a source of opportunity into which the more generic youth organisations (e.g. Scouts, DoE) can cajole, mandate, and/or assist their young people.

For many respondents cast in developmental roles, fostering the involvement of young people represented a very direct investment in the future viability of the organisation by investing them with a sense of ownership over, and commitment to, their values, with all that this entailed for future subscriptions, donations, and income generation. Moreover,

individuals operating in these positions spoke fluently the language of sustainability, are indicative of an emerging cadre of environmental professionals in the third sector that regard their work as part of a deeper moral undertaking. There was strong sense of the need – responsibility even – on the part of respondents to cultivate within their work a wider social mission and purpose (De Hoogh et al, 2005). One respondent, John (Land Manager for a National Agency) speaking of the way sustainable development agendas were central to the broader remit of their organisation, saw their work as a platform in which wider citizenship goals could be realised: “what we want [to produce] is adults who are, you know, good citizens and competent about the future and they are going to fit well into their communities and that helps them be part of the community” (Interview, 3779). This had resulted in the individual developing a rather teleological vision of the way skills and values are progressively learnt, experienced, and gained through voluntary conservation activities:

we have a sort of youth development ladder which is like a journey... [ ]... So we have taster days at schools and we have residentials. We have full time, part time volunteering and we have working holidays... So what I do is I look at that and I say ok what is the level of skill required and also gained in taking part in that ...what is the commitment?... so at one end of the scale...[they are].... learning about themselves primarily ...in an environment that is safe, that will make a difference, that can be quite inspiring...[to one in which]...they think ‘you know what actually I have been inspired and I actually want to be able to do something about it’. And so the next bit is a bit more commitment and a bit more independence and a slightly higher level of skill and you are going to be challenged to a greater degree and you are actually going to be responsible for how you respond ...[ ]...So the role is

about facilitating that journey, we don't have to own the whole journey, but we will contribute to it...[ ]... you may not think of us a youth organisation but with five thousand [young people] we have to act like a youth organisation (John, Interview 3779).

This spiralling logic represented the most overt expression of a more general idea: that environmental conservation is a context in which the wider acquisition of skills, values and attitudes could be formally recruited and planned for. However, despite the rather grand set of developmental architectures that surround these mission-orientated environmental organisations, the practice of enacting viable programmes of youth-facing activity actually occurs in a more problematical social reality. This is because resources for volunteer programmes, including the provision of paid 'community engagement' roles, are typically cross subsidised by other streams of public funding for sustainable development, which are highly competitive and invariably time limited. This means that, in practical terms, organisational aspirations to foster community development often have a very project based, stop-start 'feel' about them and tend to follow funding streams in terms of particular emphasises and purposes. This has important implications, not least for the experience of young people who find themselves involved. As Frank, involved in delivering skills to young people, put it:

You build and build and build and then you stop because you've got no more money left. You put so much effort into trying to get the next bid and the next bid and the next bid and the volunteers suffer because they've been coming along for three years solid and then think, oh you're not doing it anymore and they don't understand why we can't just fund it, they've said

to me, well it doesn't take much to run a day does it? Well it does. And they get quite...and then they feel let down because you're not doing it (Interview, 3751).

This sense of young people feeling marooned by the end of funding runs along a deeper set of organisational tensions and dilemmas. First, while community and youth development discourse figure highly in the aims of these projects, this is sometimes quite rhetorical: Thus: "we were very keen to [cover] the community aspect and almost *tick that box*" (Sam, Environmental Officer, Interview 3761). Or again, "The project was community outreach ...[ ]... *Labour* was a driving factor" (Tom, Interview 3755. Authors' emphasis). In other words, these are organisations where the salience of 'task' is never far away. This is an idea that cuts across all groups of young volunteers, including those participating through pathways of care: "because special needs groups are phenomenally good at this sort of work, they really are. They are very, because they are so blooming strong (laughs) they're very strong and very committed; they get very focussed" (Lucy, Wildlife Officer, Interview 3752).

Second, these larger organisations contain an enormous diversity of individuals within them and many will not necessarily share the relational and developmental goals of the community engagement officers. As one put it "The problem with the organisation is that this ...[ ]... it wouldn't hit anybody's radar; some see [youth work] as a bit of a bind and [say] ...what do I get out of it anyway?" (Hannah, NT Ranger, Interview 3774). In this, there was often in effect a need to train the trainers, with Ian, a national operating youth officer explaining that: "[we] do an introduction to work with young people. Which basically talks about, it is like a taster of the world through young people's eyes" (Interview 3763).

Third, partnership working with youth networks in some cases have to be actively cultivated, to the extent those with specific youth remits in the community have to be educated into the benefits of voluntary conservation, for it is precisely these individuals that are cajoling young people into participating: “[t]hey think ‘what the heck have [you] got to offer us? Our kids will be bored and all that kind of stuff’, so we have to try to encourage their involvement” was the observation of an environmental worker (Adam, Interview 3762).

Fourth, and very significantly, many of individuals charged with leading these time-limited projects often have strong backgrounds in conservation despite their community development and youth officer roles. This has implication for both the success of recruitment strategies and the effectiveness of programmes in practice. Lucy (wildlife officer) who had actively courted a school to recruit participants into a programme of work, spoke of way she has based her ‘cajoling’ strategy on the assumption of intrinsic interests in nature, and that this had patently failed. As she put it:

I think a lot of problems are coming from this side in that you assume, you just assume, why would people not be interested? You know? Why would they not? So you go in there with this terrible assumption that people are going to think looking at birds, pond dipping, looking at reptiles, is just brilliant, but they don’t (Interview 3752).

In keeping with the fusty image of amateur conservation identified above, this particular respondent expressed worry that she would “come across as some fuddy-duddy old conservationist who really doesn’t have a clue” (Interview 3752) and indeed reflected that

generating enthusiasm may less on a nature focus *per se*, but a wider sense of *social process*. This she describes as the:

Ray Mears<sup>4</sup>, forest schools, stuff, which a lot of kids do find completely engaging and they love it, because they can relate more to it, because it's actually something that they can go and do easily. You know the whole thing about building dens and having fires and, you know, that's fantastic and I do think. You know, the whole survival instinct is in everybody and I just think people love that sort of, I think they find that more interesting for some reason than they do looking at butterflies and crickets and birds and flowers (Lucy, Interview 3752).

The respondent realised that engagement in conservation needed to be built less out of studious interests and enthusiasms in nature, and more around unleashing natural bodily instincts. This idea picks up on a wider tendency in the way voluntary conservation activities are now promoted: as adventurous, embodied activities in a 'green-' or 'nature-gym' that deliver experiential benefits such 'intrepidity' and through which underpinning interests may be cultivated (Calogiuri and Elliot, 2017).

In terms of the practical delivery of these programmes, we found that one outcome of having such strong conservation background is that individuals tend to fall back into highly explanatory task-based approaches to youth engagement, which do little to engage young hearts and minds. As Jeff, an environmental education officer, put it:

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<sup>4</sup> The presenter of several 'outward bound' and 'survivalist' programmes on British television.

It was very practically based which didn't suit some people. it was a bit less focused on the person. it was more on the task and it was probably a little bit more to the point I suppose, for my sins in effect, and I think they may have wanted a little bit, maybe not found it not enough fun I think (Interview 3778).

As Jeff further explained: "I wanted to get that kind of *underlying reason* for why we were doing this... I think the *why* was always the underlying factor" (authors' emphasis, interview 3778), by which he meant an interest in environmental product. In this particular case, the interviewee argued that as participation in activities waned, the wider relational and experiential elements of engagement gradually dawned on him, so that gradually: "I tried to make it probably a bit more enjoyable and made more of an effort in getting the fire going and this kind of thing... I realised that is actually quite an important element and these people are coming out for a day out as much as anything else" (Jeff, Interview 3778).

In sum, we have illustrated that young people both produce the materiality of the countryside through their physical efforts, but are also the subjects of didactic pedagogic efforts to reskill and educate youth as custodians of the future countryside. The making and remaking of rural space by volunteers is a fluid process that goes beyond normative and homogenising interpretations not only of the materiality of the countryside but of those groups involved in this creative exercise. However, we have also shown how the distinction between different types of organisation is important for the experience and outcomes for youth volunteers; specifically with regard to their role and the activities they undertake. We

argue that in order to be really effective in ‘designing young people in’, these organisations must also recognise that the young people who reach them arrive by different pathways – self-motivated, cajoled, mandated and needy - via organisations as diverse as the Scouts, or Duke of Edinburgh where volunteers are strongly self-motivated to young offenders where volunteers are mandated into voluntary work. The important thing to note here is that these pathways do not map neatly onto the different organisations: any given organisation might have a mixture of young people arriving via different pathways. Understanding and working with this to effectively engage and deploy volunteers is vital both to the satisfaction of these volunteers and sustainability of volunteering as a way of caring for the rural environment.

## 8.0: Conclusions

This paper offers a critique of current environmental volunteering for young people and in doing so contributes toward wider debates on the form and function of the volunteering sector. We began by initially setting-out how the UK Government have deployed a dual policy of withdrawing certain state services, such as youth services, whilst at the same encouraging the voluntary sector to meet new demands and foster a sense of community citizenship. The new voluntary policy and practice arena is in part a consequence of austerity measures, and in part an ideological (re)framing of building a ‘Big (green) Society’ predicated on resilient communities of self-help (Bell and Vanner, 2011, Cook and Inman, 2012, Kelly and Yarwood, 2018). Given the high participation rates in volunteering, especially amongst young people, it is neither useful nor convincing to simply argue that the sector has failed to meet the new demands being placed upon it. To illustrate this point, we developed the concept of ‘sweat equity’ as a means of exposing the ‘toil’ or ‘work done’ in

the service of volunteering. Evidently there are considerable numbers of young people engaged in environmental volunteering work. Yet, we assert that rather than providing an opportunity to bring young people into discussions over the substitution of state services and the role of volunteering in their communities, the current focus on mandating ready-made groups of young people into volunteering and enhancing their skills development for future employment opportunities has paradoxically accelerated the distancing of them from their communities.

Further, environmental volunteering is not necessarily being deployed as a substitution for state services, rather it becomes a replacement activity in the lives of young people.

Enrolling young people into voluntary schemes has become a function of organisations such as schools and clubs, reducing levels of perceived risk as risky play and risky activities are being strategically managed out of the lives of young people by their parents and organisations, as young people are placed in alternative safe and green activities (Leysdon et al., 2013). Environmental agencies have responded to this demand by packaging volunteering as a sellable commodity, happy to receive the 'toil' of communities of young people.

As we have shown, young people and agencies intellectualise the experience of environmental volunteering and understand how it personally benefits individuals and not communities as hoped for in wider policy discourse. This is achieved via skills training, being occupied and active in the countryside and keeping young people out of trouble. In this manner environmental volunteering is not focused on encouraging the responsabilisation of the individual for acts altruism, but rather for social and economic ends. Volunteering in this

sense is a form of economic citizenship that trains young people for a future workforce.

Our concern is to question the extent to which these processes are helping to create active volunteers to meet the demands of future need, rather than providing sweat equity. Young people have much to offer in support of vibrant and sustainable communities and can help plan activities that are informed by their interests. In particular, the more effective inclusion of youth in planning environmental volunteering can result in the provision of public 'environmental' space that benefits both young people and the wider community. In an era of increasingly privatised, policed, and consumption-oriented spaces, focusing on the needs of young people can offer a way to preserve a more democratic idea of public space.

In the context of sustainable rural development, environmental conservation is a context in which the ethics of community contribution and environmental care can be cultivated, in what we term 'in the service of community' and 'enabling nature' respectively. Our argument is that it is in the intersection of these two concerns that the aspirations, capacities and esteem of young people are most likely to be enacted, yet as our findings suggest, it is often the case that the precise inversion of these precepts is applied. Crucially, pathways to these sustainable intersections of nature and community in rural areas are dependent upon building effective working partnerships between both youth development networks and environmental practitioners.

To build capacity in the environmental volunteering sector and produce life-long environmental aspirants requires a shift in emphasis from the delivery of pedagogic or disciplinary (coercion) modes of engagement for ready-made communities of young people

to one based on young people's personal and social development. Environmental education for the sole purpose of the external governance of youth through self-improvement and discipline does not work for young people. In terms of policy, to build future 'aspirants' we need youth and voluntary sectors that can facilitate the work of the environmental conservation sector at an early stage. In particular, one in which wider life-skills are fostered (such as leadership, management and co-ordination) alongside environmental skills and knowledges.

This paper illustrates that future attempts to enable young people to learn about and become participants in environmental volunteering will only be successful if youth-serving and environmental organisations implement and sustain programmes that reflect a more comprehensive and integrated approach. This approach combines both instructional and experiential opportunities that are meaningful to young people themselves. Recognising this, however, raises a set of future research questions, all the more pertinent in the UK as volunteering is given greater political priority.

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