

‘From ambivalence to activism: young people’s environmental views and actions’¹

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Author:

Emma Partridge

Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology, Sydney

PO Box 123 Broadway NSW 2000

t. (02) 9514 4954

e. emma.partridge@uts.edu.au

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? 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. It acknowledges (after Connell et al 1999) that for many young people environmental concern is mixed with ‘frustration, cynicism and action paralysis’. However, the paper seeks to qualify this claim, firstly by pointing out that this ambivalence is certainly not unique to young people, and secondly, by highlighting some of the many ways in which young people are overcoming this inertia and taking strong environmental action. The paper concludes with some examples of the kinds of activism currently being taken by young people – spurred on in recent times by an apparent deepening of concern about climate change and dismay at the lack of political leadership shown by their elders.

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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.

Attitudinal polling of young people generally finds that this group sees environmental issues as important. For example, in a report for the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, Bentley et al found nine out of ten Australians aged 12-28 when surveyed were either ‘concerned’ or ‘very concerned’ about the environment (2004:39). A 2003 ‘youth poll’ undertaken by the Australian Democrats found 76 per cent of respondents believed the government was not doing enough to protect the environment (Australian Democrats, 2003). Similarly, a Victorian poll found high levels of environmental concern among 16-24 year olds, including 91 per cent who agreed that ‘the threat to the environment is real and must be taken seriously’, and four out of five who favoured protecting the environment even if it meant some reduction in economic growth (Melbourne Water: 2000). These survey results are consistent with the findings of earlier focus-group research that reports high levels of concern among young people about a range of environmental problems (Connell et al 1999).

Such findings 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 the studies 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.

Comparative studies tend to find that environmental concern is actually somewhat lower among young people than among older people. For example, a 2004 ABS 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 of whom 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. 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 was the largest (from 57% in 2001 down to 49% in 2004 for those aged 18–24 years) (ABS 2004).

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 Dennis 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 then NSW Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) (2006:25) provides further evidence that younger people have lower levels of environmental concern 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 apparently lower levels of environmentally positive behaviour among young people. Dennis 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 have engaged in four out of ten pro-environmental behaviours over the previous twelve months (2006:55). For nine of the ten behaviours listed, this age group was less likely than others to say they had often or sometimes engaged in the behaviour (2006:61).²

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.

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 research 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, young people generally rank the environment as a fairly low priority. Issues that are assigned greater priority tend to be those that are more ‘personal’ or immediately related to young people’s lives. 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). 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

² These results should be viewed with a degree of caution however, as some of the behaviours were of a kind that many young people would not have had the opportunity to engage in (for example, ‘chosen better household products’, or ‘reduced fuel consumption/vehicle air pollution’).

issues. Similarly in the Australian Democrats' most recent 'youth poll'³ (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. Results from the Mission Australia national survey of young people that has been conducted annually in recent years (Mission Australia, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007)⁴ also suggest that, compared to other issues, the environment is not highly valued by Australian young people. Each year between 2004 and 2006, 'Environmental issues' was ranked last overall in a list of 8-10 options, with less than 9 per cent of respondents ranking it in their top three.

However, as with much attitudinal polling, responses depend on how the questions are asked. A major drawback of many of the polls mentioned above is that environmental issues are often lumped in with issues of a very different type or scale – many of which most respondents, irrespective of age would be likely to assign a higher priority. In the Mission Australia survey for example, while the lists have varied slightly each year, the other issues respondents are asked to rank have all been 'personal', positive issues (such as relationships, friendships, being independent, feeling needed, school or study satisfaction and so on). 'Environmental issues' has been the only 'global' or 'political' item (and the only one not framed as a positive value), so the survey has not allowed a particularly meaningful ranking of environmental issues with other 'issues of concern'. However, in the latest 2007 survey, 'environmental issues' was removed as an answer option for the question about what young people value, and added instead to the question that asked people to rank 'issues of concern'. As a result, the latest version of this survey arguably provides a more accurate picture of where environmental issues sit in the mix of issues that concern young people. It shows that 'the environment' is a significant concern for 23.4% of respondents, coming sixth in the list of fifteen issues (Mission Australia 2007). It is not clear however, whether this finding is the result of the restructured survey or is suggestive of an increase in young people's environmental awareness and concern in the last eighteen months or so – a period in which environmental issues have come dramatically to prominence in the media and popular culture, particularly following the publication of the UK Government's 'Stern report' and the release of Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Acknowledging ambivalence and complexity

The research cited above should challenge any simplistic assertion 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 acknowledge 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 choose 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

³ 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.

⁴ This is a survey of people aged 11-24 years. While it varies slightly each year, typically, over 50% of respondents are in the 15-19 years age group; with around 45% aged 11-14 and less than 5% aged 20-24. Hence the survey cannot be said to accurately reflect the views of people at the older end of this age range.

respectively *expected* a 'growth' society focused on individual wealth, economic growth and efficiency and enjoying 'the good life'. This deep pessimism about environmental issues is also found among the young people interviewed by Connell et al (1999) whose saw it as a 'reality' (not merely a 'belief') that environmental problems were going to get worse.

The kinds of attitudinal research cited above should demonstrate that, like those of other groups, the environmental views and attitudes of young people are complex, often context-dependent and undoubtedly difficult to 'measure'. Furthermore, young people are not a homogenous group. Age-based generalisations need to be qualified by an acknowledgement of the many differences among and between young people – they, like any other age group are characterised by differences marked by gender, class, cultural background, geography, level 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 differences between them (she stresses gender in particular), are often more significant than similarities. Similarly, studies of environmental attitudes among young people suggest significant intra-group variation, 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 (Mission Australia 2007) found a slightly higher level of environmental concern among young men compared to young women, and a similar level of involvement in environmental activities for young men and young women. Differences between the environmental attitudes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people have also been noted in both overseas (Creech et al 1999) and Australian literature (Mission Australia 2007 found slightly higher levels of concern among Indigenous young people, and a higher incidence of involvement in environmental activities).

Furthermore, 'young people's views' are not 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 it 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 apparent fall in the proportion 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 (Australian Democrats 2003) – could be seen support this political analysis. Indeed, this finding is consistent with 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's attitudes 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 highly ambivalent attitudes towards environmental issues, or the tendency to prioritise more 'personal' issues is certainly not confined to young people.

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 cannot 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. They also noted that few of the young people in their study seemed willing to

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 2006.

acknowledge how their own actions could be contributing to environmental problems (Connell et al 1999). Bentley et al (2004:39) note a similar 'disconnect between social concern and personal action' in the young people they surveyed about consumption.

This kind of paralysing disconnect between concern for an issue on the one hand, and lack of personal responsibility for seeking a solution on the other, may well be a hallmark of young people's relationship to environmental issues. Indeed, it may be precisely because of their youth that many young people have not yet developed the kind of citizenship consciousness, or understanding of their own agency that might allow them to overcome their action paralysis and take personal action on environmental issues. However, we should be wary about attributing this disconnect, ambivalence, or refusal of responsibility only to young people. Clearly the failure to see the connection between one's own actions and environmental problems is not confined to this group! Indeed the 2004 DEC 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). Further, it is highly plausible that, if young people are disconnected from the environmental impacts of their actions, then they have learned this attitude from older generations. 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?

As the DEC survey shows, while they may not know what to do about it, many young people do have a high level of awareness, not just of environmental problems, but of their own environmentally damaging behaviours. In the survey this seemed particularly true in relation to waste – young people were 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).

Overcoming action paralysis: examples of environmental action by young people

While some young people may be characterised by the kind of 'action paralysis' that grips many people in all age groups when it comes to the environment, others are clearly highly active. A survey of Victorian young people for example, 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). As well as the many young people taking individual actions, there are also significant examples of collective environmental actions and activism that young people are not only active participants in, but that they initiate and sustain themselves. These include both the wide range of 'hands-on' restoration activities, and the more political or activist focused actions that seek to create broader change.

Many young people are involved in 'hands-on' environmental projects – that is, those that involve practical actions, usually local or site-specific environmental restoration or conservation, but also including 'sustainable living' actions. Various organisations run environmental projects of this kind that are specifically aimed at 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, featuring monitoring and restoration. Examples of this type of program are Parks Victoria's Environment Corps program⁶ for secondary students (environmental awareness and research

⁶ See: http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au/education/project.cfm?project_id=1

and monitoring projects in state parks), OZGREEN's various 'My River' projects⁷ (basin-based education and environmental action) and OZGREEN's 'Youth LEAD' program⁸ (environmental action combined with leadership training, networking and mentoring).

One current project for young people that has a hands-on focus, but on 'sustainable living' actions rather than environmental restoration or conservation, is OTHERWISE. A project of the International Young Professionals Foundation and researchers at RMIT University, OTHERWISE is 'a community capacity building program for youth leadership on sustainability issues', with a focus on sustainable consumption issues. OTHERWISE runs a number of projects, including a partnership with Manningham City Council (in Melbourne) to train and support 15-25 year olds to take action on sustainability. In the ACT, OTHERWISE is supporting young people to deliver a range of projects that address environmental sustainability issues, including documentary-making, clothing recycling, and an environmentally produced music festival.⁹

Many young people are also involved in generalist (i.e. not youth-specific) environmental programs and projects of the 'hands-on' variety. 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.

Finally, some young people are taking environmental action via a range of overtly political or activist focused work that seeks to create broader social or political change. In fact, 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). Similarly, when Print et al (2005) asked young people what protest movement they were most likely to join, they found that 30 per cent nominated the 'green/environmentalist movement'. This was the second most popular answer (after 'anti-war movement').

There are many current examples of young people participating in environmental activism, campaigning and lobbying, both of their own making, and as part of established groups, networks and organisations. Perhaps the largest network is the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN), which is a national network of students who take action on 'environmental justice issues'. ASEN consists of state environment networks, which in turn encompass campus environment collectives from most Australian university campuses. The Network was created by and continues to be organised by young activists. Students use the network to organise local and national campaigns and share information and resources. ASEN meets annually at the Students of Sustainability conference, and also holds a 'summer gathering', to create an annual strategic plan, and share skills and knowledge between environment activists from around the country. In 2007 ASEN ran the first of planned annual training events at which over sixty students from across Australia met for a week of 'training and skillshares on collective organising, developing campaign strategies, strategic questions, media, non-violent direct action, and more'.¹²

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 Information from Australian Otherwise Network website: <http://ozotherwise.wordpress.com/about/> and ACT OTHERWISE blog: <http://groups.takingitglobal.org/act-otherwise>

¹⁰ See the Natural Heritage Trust website: <http://www.nht.gov.au>

¹¹ See Clean Up Australia website <http://www.cleanup.com.au>

¹² Information from ASEN website: <http://www.asen.org.au/>

A new wave of activism? Young people galvanised by climate change

One recent survey suggests that the active involvement of young people in environmental issues has increased in recent years, with 13 per cent of respondents in 2007 reporting involvement in environmental issues – double the proportion doing so in 2005 (Mission Australia 2007). While this apparently rapid increase undoubtedly needs further investigation, it appears that, like many Australians, young people may be being spurred into action by the increasing level of media coverage of, and growing awareness and concern about climate change that has been evident in the past twelve to eighteen months. One of the newest activist groups is the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, formed in late 2006 when 60 young people representing 35 youth organisations from around Australia gathered in Melbourne. The AYCC describes itself as ‘a non-partisan coalition determined to mobilise our generation in the struggle for climate justice and a clean energy future’. It seeks to ‘educate, inspire and mobilise young people, influence government, and implement concrete solutions’. Galvanised by ‘the absence of significant action by industry and government’, the AYCC aims to unite a range of young people and youth organisations in order to ‘build and strengthen a generation wide movement to stop climate change’. Activities undertaken by the Coalition include organising (in collaboration with ASEN), a Youth Climate Action conference; ‘Switched on’ in Sydney in 2007, and sending a youth delegation to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali, Indonesia in December 2007. The Coalition is also running a schools program, delivering information, education, and peer-to-peer education, empowerment and training programs to high school students.¹³

The strength, and recent expansion of ASEN¹⁴ and the emergence of AYCC is evidence of the way in which some groups of young people are overcoming any ‘action paralysis’ and engaging in strong environmental action and activism that is motivated by a deep concern about the future. The following extract from a speech by the Australian Youth Delegation to the 2007 United Nations Climate Change Conference illustrates this emerging form of activism well:

“The climate emergency is our best and possibly last opportunity to create a global consciousness. We are inspired by those of you taking true leadership, both at home and internationally. We are ashamed of the so-called 'leaders' who are delaying action in this UN process and who are actively compromising our future. We cannot wait any longer. If you lead us on the wrong path, we have no time to find our way back and undo your decisions. The potential effects will be devastating and indiscriminant. Youth around the world are rising to the challenge. As emerging leaders, we are mobilizing the public, building powerful movements, and forging international coalitions. ... We are already inheriting the consequences of your choices. The world is watching, the youth are rising. Join us.” (Jones et al 2007)

Perhaps then, for older generations the focus should no longer be on explaining or changing young people’s attitudes. Rather the challenge is to acknowledge the ‘devastating and indiscriminant’ effects that our own inaction will have on young people if we fail to respond to impassioned calls like this one.

¹³ Information from Youth Climate Coalition website: www.youthclimatecoalition.org

¹⁴ In 2006, ASEN completed its constitution, began publishing a biannual magazine *Germinate*, established its first budget, and employed a paid convenor. In 2007 the Network ran the first of planned annual Summer Training Camps for students from around Australia.

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