



greenminds



Communities and artists: co-creating new pathways to nature connectedness in Plymouth

EVALUATION OF THE GREEN MINDS CREATIVE COMMISSIONS SERIES.



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Preface

In August 2021, ¹Green Minds in partnership with Arts University Plymouth and Low Carbon Devon, University of Plymouth, launched a series of five creative commissions to support communities and artists in Plymouth to work together to explore new ways of engaging in local sustainability and ecological issues. Core to the creative commissions' approach was the Pathways to Nature Connectedness framework² with each of the five tenders being designed to support at least one of the five 'pathways'.

- SENSES** tuning in to nature through the senses
- EMOTION** feeling alive through the emotions and feelings nature brings
- BEAUTY** noticing nature's beauty
- MEANING** nature bringing meaning to our lives
- COMPASSION** caring and taking action for nature

“The pathways to nature connectedness provide a route for people to develop a new relationship with the natural world. This new relationship with nature can move beyond utility and control, beyond knowledge and identification.”³

UNIVERSITY OF DERBY - NATURE CONNECTEDNESS RESEARCH GROUP.



1.1 The Commissions

Delivered over Spring and Summer of 2022, these public facing commissions comprised diverse creative practices and media; storytelling, drama, craft, a forest school, regenerative growing and digital technology, including animation and augmented reality digital technology.

The interface and engagement between geographic communities, artists and specific urban settings was supported by an exploratory workshop model and partnerships with local organisations and community hubs.

All of the commissions shared a co-production ethos and methodology, aimed to support participants and artists to develop the creative work in collaboration. The artists were experienced facilitators who supported participants to engage in creative processes; to communicate personal responses to the topic of nature and the impact of the climate crisis; and to prioritise participants' local knowledge and experiences within this process.

Commissioning partners Plymouth City Council, Low Carbon Devon (University of Plymouth), and Arts University Plymouth, wanted to test:

- How creative interventions in urban settings in Plymouth could support new ways of connecting Plymouth communities to their local natural environment.
- Benefits of a multi-partner approach for sharing resources and learning across existing networks in the city and the South West.

“It’s different to going on a hike or to the beach, it’s (the workshops) intriguing. It’s more than saying it’s broken or it’s polluted, it gives you a deeper understanding and awareness.”

YOUNG PERSON; STORYTELLING WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT

¹ Green Minds is a four year partnership project supported by ERDF Urban Innovation Action. Led by Plymouth City Council the project explores a systems approach to delivering nature based solutions. <https://greenmindsplymouth.com/our-vision>

² A methodological approach for improving human – nature relationships and evaluating pro-environmental behaviours. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/26395916.2020.1844296>

³ <https://www.derby.ac.uk/research/centres-groups/nature-connectedness-research-group/>

⁴ <https://greenmindsplymouth.com/green-minds-creative-commissions>

2.0 Introduction to the evaluation report

The evaluation assessed the potential of art making and creative activity for acting as ‘leverage’ for some of the five pathways to nature connectedness; to what extent and in what ways various creative activities provided ‘leverage’.

The report focuses on:

- Individual and group experiences of collective art making processes.
- Evidence of change in perception or attitudes, both personal and collective to nature.
- Identifying key aspects of the commissions model that supports such change.
- Potential of embedding this model over the longer term.
- How this could be achieved with the next steps.

This written evaluation report is based on a series of semi structured, qualitative audio and film interviews with participants, artists and project partners. There is a [short film](#) that accompanies the report youtu.be/xd-BuGnvpsE



3.0 Summary of findings

The site specific nature of each creative intervention within a local setting or geographic community provided scope to bring participants, artists and wider audiences into dialogue with local features, contexts and issues; threats to the urban ecology - ash dieback, the biodiversity of a local park and community priorities in Stoke and Devonport.

The role of the facilitator in many cases was key in creating a space that participants felt not just ‘allowed’ in but gradually gained ‘ownership’ of. The time and space offered within the workshops to form new social connections was highlighted by many participants as supporting open communication and collaborative art making.

Existing communities and infrastructure have a significant role for supporting the commissions and ensuring the work is relevant and meaningful to participants and local audiences. Identifying the reciprocal benefits of sharing resources and knowledge in a local context through creative interventions will help build a sustainable framework for the next steps.

“It was very nice to see the development and how we really needed time, and you need to know the people. You can’t just bring a random bunch of people together and say ‘make!’.”

CHRISTINA - PARENT AND PARTICIPANT WILD WATER STORIES



3.1 New perceptions and narratives of nature

New narratives about nature are seen to have emerged as a result of the different workshop processes and models of co-production.

Some creative practices used in the workshops, such as storytelling, writing and drama clearly outline for participants how to develop a narrative. This was through the use of with the use of devices such as characterisation or metaphor to imagine and articulate different ‘voices’ and viewpoints.

“I thought it was fun. We did something different each week. My favourite part was making the masks and dressing up. We made masks for the arts and crafts and we each made a bit of the Phoenix. Then we all went into Phoenix mode!”

YOUNG PERSON, WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT, WILD FIRE STORIES

Some participants observed how the activity of mark making and craft processes enhanced their observation and enabled retention of new knowledge about plants found in Blockhouse Park in Stoke, for example.

The potential of digital and augmented reality technology to reach and engage wider audiences using both imaginative and cognitive means is also clear.

While it is apparent that the medium of a given creative activity, story telling or mark making for example, is a key factor in generating new perspectives, it is not the only one. One participant on the Flax Project, was able to re-evaluate and shift learned understanding of materials by referencing experiences of his former workplace of Devonport Dockyard to gain a new conceptual understanding of natural and regenerative processes.

“I used to work at the Dockyard making steel at the foundry, and you bring stuff in to make steel. I understand that, but what I didn’t understand was taking flowers and this little weak stem, which turned out to be a very strong stem. And you can make ropes that can take tonnes, literally tonnes. And I didn’t understand how that was possible.”

RON, WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT, THE FLAX PROJECT.



Technology is for a great many people, the main window on the world, so to tilt that window in the direction of nature and the climate crisis makes perfect sense.

JON, PARTICIPANT, ASHNIHILATION



3.2 What do participants value about the Creative Commissions Series?

Other factors which contributed to participants' confidence to engage in what may have been an unfamiliar activity within a new group of people were mentioned; the input and experience of the facilitator, developing social relationships and building a new 'community' over the course of the workshops and opportunities to talk openly and be listened to.

“(Facilitator) has been very good at sort of making sure that we're present in these places, you know, because basically everybody's been having their normal day to day life before you come here. And so you want to try and put yourself in the right frame of mind and and everything. So that's been interesting.”

CLAIRE, WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT, WILD AIR STORIES

Participants took pride in contributing something tangible and visible to the local environment through making something or sharing a story, thereby adding something personal to a bigger conversation in the public domain.

“What is made here today will add to the history of the park. It is here and available for people to see. You get a little proud kind of, yeah, a happy little dance inside thinking, oh, I was part of that.”

JO, WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT AND LOCAL RESIDENT, SAPLINGS MICRO-COMMISSIONS

Having time and space to consider as a group the urgency of the climate crisis was seen as a vital step in formulating and taking action and steps to address this.

“Something that was definitely spoken about in the sessions was how the idea of climate change is very overwhelming. Like if you really think about it, that can cause like eco anxiety which causes you to have these responses like... oh, I just don't have the time! And really, you know, you have the time, there has to be a point where we say, okay, this is important.”

SHADAY, WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT, ROOTS IN NATURE



“It's always a lot easier to have something that you can talk about rather than just talking about yourself so that it will be interesting to see nature from a different point of view.”

PARENT AND WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT.

3.3 What supports new connections to nature?

Evidence points to three factors which can support creation of new connections to nature and local spaces on an ongoing basis.

- 1 Creating spaces for collaborative and group working; creative and imaginative spaces, social spaces, community and geographical spaces.
- 2 The skills and experience of artist facilitators to support creative processes and the formation of new narratives about nature, personal, collective and public.
- 3 Cross sector partnerships, local infrastructure and shared resources can ensure sustainability of changes and embed new practices.

3.4 How could longer term impacts be sustained?

Invest in local community and natural infrastructure: it has a key role in providing spaces and framework for creative activity and meaningful community engagement to take place.

Invest in training and opportunities for artists: artists and creatives have vital skills to offer, supporting people to imagine a different future for the environment and generate creative shared solutions.

Identify the reciprocal benefits at a local and partnership level: so all voices are included and have a stake in future action.

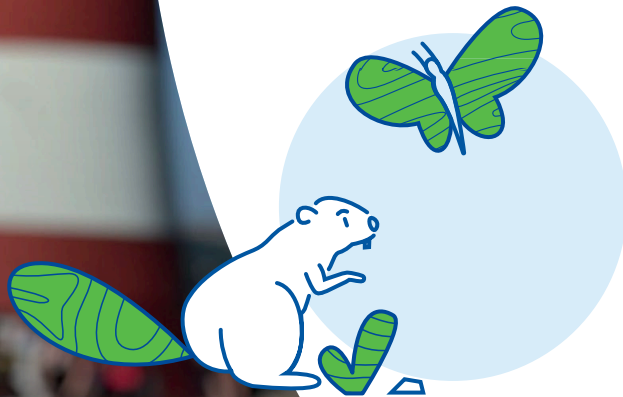
Continue to share knowledge and experiment across sectors and disciplines: this can help create better models for engaging and supporting communities to generate solutions to the climate crisis.





4.0 Conclusions

Creativity and imagination can help to envisage a brighter future for the environment and creative approaches to complex problems can help overcome the challenges our planet faces.



The role of the facilitator in many cases was key in creating a space that participants felt not just ‘allowed’ in but gradually gained ‘ownership’ of. The time and space offered within the workshops to form new social connections was highlighted by many participants as supporting open communication and collaborative art making.

Existing communities and infrastructure have a significant role for supporting the commissions and ensuring the work is relevant and meaningful to participants and local audiences. Identifying the reciprocal benefits of sharing resources and knowledge in a local context through creative interventions will help build a sustainable framework for the next steps.

The report can identify three spheres or levels of intervention required for changes in attitudes and perception to take place and to be galvanised into actions.

Personal and collective: The Five Pathways to nature connectedness, as mediated by creative activities are a powerful tool for supporting individuals and groups to develop new responses and behaviour and are a framework for understanding and replicating this model.

Public: Creative activities and outputs can bring individuals and communities into debates and conversations about the climate crisis, supporting and empowering new voices to be heard in this space.

Structural: Stronger links between sectors and disciplines along with investment in artists, local communities will all support shared learning and solutions.

“Having the energy of young people and ideas of young people, it is one of the most exciting things we can have to work with. We need to create more pathways into leadership roles, so we can hang on to their coat tails and see where it all goes.”

**KAREN PILKINGTON, COMMISSION LEAD,
SAPLINGS MICRO-COMMISSIONS**

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“All of those skills we have really honed as artists, we are inviting other people to take part in. Artists are always on the lookout using all of our senses to interrogate the world.”

**RACHEL DOBBS ARTIST, FACILITATOR AND
COMMISSION LEAD, MICRO-SAPLING COMMISSIONS**



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This project is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund through the Urban Innovative Actions Initiative.



REAL IDEAS



ARTS UNIVERSITY PLYMOUTH



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SUPPORTING ENTERPRISES TO REACH NET ZERO



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Report compiled by Fotonow

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