Summary data from M.A. - FUTURES STUDIES RESEARCH
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The Children's Voice :
Their Concerns and Search for a Role in
Influencing the Environment of the Future

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research project was undertaken to ascertain the ideas of today's young people relating to the environment, with a view to determine likely roles for young people who wish to have a voice in influencing the environment of the future.

Research of the topic was separated into three areas:

(i)   young people's concerns regarding the future of our environment
(ii) the perceptions of young people with a commitment to the environment, of the constraints inhibiting their involvement in influencing environmental issues
(iii) their ideas on the role that young people can adopt to influence the environment of the future

RESEARCH RESULTS: CONCERNS

Responses submitted to the Millennium Kids 2001 Postcard Campaign formed the basis of the Concerns data collected for the research project.

Nine major themes or categories of environmental concern that resulted were:

- **Waste**
- **Forests and Forestry Practices & Native Flora**
- **Native Animals**
- **Use of Non-Renewable Resources & Energy Sources**
- **Pollution**
- **Oceans**
- **Environmental Commitment**
- **Global Warming**
- **Salinity**
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Waste

Waste emerged as the major concern of respondents to the 2001 Millennium Kids Postcard Campaign. A total of 117 concerns relating to litter, recycling programs, recycling behaviour and unnecessarily wasteful practices were listed in this category.

The majority of the concerns about littering related to the desire for increased or better use of refuse bins; increased penalties for littering and greater monitoring by the authorities to apprehend litter offenders.

Respondents were quick to suggest an increase in the number of special events to focus on the litter problem and to duplicate the perceived success of the current initiatives e.g. Clean Up Australia Day. Young people's suggestions included implementation of a *"local community clean up day each month"*.

Recycling concerns were noted as two distinct categories - the first focussed on the overall need for more easily accessible recycling centres and receptacles – *"recycling plants need to be in large centres, small towns need to recycle then send to the city, also house recycling"*. The second category was behavioural - *"reuse disposable water bottles"* and encouraged increased recycling of specific items, especially paper, plastics and bottles.

Unnecessary waste was a concern for young people and, in this instance, was reflected in terms of the overuse of paper and wasteful practices to do with water usage – *"I am concerned about wasting water, it should be mandatory to have water tanks"*.

Forests and Forestry Practices & Native Flora

Concerns relating to the protection of forests and national parks were expressed in several differing forms, including the cutting down of too many trees and their insufficient rate of replacement. Protection of old growth forests and concerns regarding the threat to native flora, including the issue of Dieback that threatens native fauna, comprised the major messages captured within this category. Many of the 77 concerns included in this category were expressed in relatively simplistic but direct terms. Some response types were repetitive, but they represent the breadth of concern expressed within the campaign.

Comments related to the protection of forests & national parks included concerns about the logging of old growth forests, and logging generally, and ideas on how to better protect forests. For example: *"make governments reduce logging"*.

"Sustainable forestry" was a term used by one respondent to capture the frequently expressed concern that too many trees are being cut down and that there is insufficient replacement. On other occasions respondents expressed their concerns as clearly stated facts accompanied by a young person's concept of a method to overcome the concern, for example *"trees and bushes being logged are removing our natural heritage, builders should replant at least 25%"*. The importance of trees to oxygen replenishment and as a habitat for native animals was also often raised in this category.

Although expressed to a lesser extent than concerns about trees, concerns and threats to native flora in general were highlighted within the postcard data. Many concerns about the Dieback disease were mentioned and generic expressions of concern included: *"kill the weeds"*, *"make paths so our plants don't get walked on"* or *"put barriers around injured."*

Native Animals

There were 60 separate concerns expressed about native fauna. Included in these concerns were views about threats from introduced species, dangers to animals from litter and concerns for animal welfare from the degradation and loss of habitat.

The clearing of bush land and other damage to the natural habitat of native animals was a significant recurring theme within this category. Ideas for improvement included better fencing of vulnerable areas and restrictions on land development and developers.

Greater control of domestic animals was also raised as was animal protection ideas, for example, the creation of safe havens like frog ponds and bird homes. *"Introduced animals are the worst pests because they take food from native animals and kill other animals"*.

Respondents highlighted a need for specific breeding programs for endangered species. Threats from a number of previously identified sources like litter, loss of trees and pollution were also raised in this context to highlight their specific harmful impact on native fauna.

Use Of Non-Renewable Resources

Within the category of non-renewable resources, the researcher captured 46 comments of concern that related to the need to protect the earth's scarce natural resources and promote the use of alternative energy products and practices.

The over-use of cars, electricity wastage and an over dependence on power generation from non-renewable sources were three consistent themes. Ideas to reduce car usage included car pooling, walking and cycling. Solar power applications were suggested for cars and as an alternative to gas, electricity and wood for heating – *"use solar power instead of fossil fuel, set up solar panels nation-wide"*.

Pollution

Concerns included under the banner of pollution have been grouped in three main areas – air, water and industry. In addition, there were a few general comments referring to the respondents' observations that incidents of pollution appear to be increasing.

Air pollution caused by cars was the most commonly raised item, although the polluting effect from burning of fossil fuels was also highlighted.

Concerns about water pollution fell into two classes. One related to the contamination of rivers and other waterways from liquid pollutants like sewerage and oils but also from the release of chemicals. The second related to the effects of waste and litter as noted earlier, and refers to the impact of rubbish being dropped or washed into rivers. Two respondents recorded concern about pollution caused by emissions from industry.

Oceans

Concerns to do with the ocean, and the general threat to the marine environment, included issues such as the impact of litter and sewerage on marine life and the threat to fish stocks from overfishing. Because of the number of items specific to the marine environment, a separate category was created to differentiate oceans from the more general issues that were raised under the 'water pollution' category.

Bait bags and plastic ring holders from beer packaging are examples noted of the concerns about the impact that discarded rubbish can have on marine animals – *"stop litter from getting from the streets into the river and then the sea, fish may be killed"*. Shipping was seen as a risk to the environment due to the potential for oil spills. Fishing practices that contribute to a depletion of fish stocks, or the inadvertent killing of marine life was also raised – *"educate people about seals getting caught by fishing lines"*.

Commitment to the Environment

Inadequate leadership in relation to the importance of the environment, particularly commitment to environmental education and awareness raising, forms a large component of the concerns included in this category. Government legislation to ensure that environmental issues are dealt with was also described as inadequate.

The approach used by Millennium Kids was raised a number of times as an illustration of good leadership and an effective way of increasing environmental awareness and getting environmental projects done.

Lack of funding for projects was seen as a lack of commitment to action. Governments, including local governments, were identified as needing to lead by example with respect to giving environmental issues a higher priority.

Global Warming

Concerns relating to the issue of global warming through ozone depletion and greenhouse gases were raised.

Specific reference to global warming was noted here although there are obvious linkages with many of the earlier categories in terms of the factors contributing to this effect. Damage to the ozone layer and the prevention of greenhouse gases were the most consistent messages included here.

Salinity

Rising salt levels on farmlands and the effect on trees from salinity was captured in responses. Respondents noted that they regarded salinity as a very serious problem. Others suggested remedies for the problems which included planting more trees in affected areas and harvesting salt for commercial gain.

The seven major themes for the constraints that young people consider inhibit their involvement in influencing environmental issues were determined to relate to:

- **Credibility**
- **Encouragement And Support**
- **General Interest In The Environment**
- **Knowledge**
- **Confidence**
- **Opportunity**
- **Peer Pressure**

CREDIBILITY : Low Credibility

Responses from research participants that related to the low credibility that the children perceive they have with those they seek to influence. More specifically, comments referred to children *"not being listened to"*; *"being seen as inexperienced and incapable"*; and *"not being sufficiently responsible to warrant credibility"*. Some responses described how children see themselves as being *"powerless within an adult world"*.

The predominant view was that *"nobody listens to kids like they listen to adults"*. They saw themselves as being ignored by both adults and teenagers and not taken seriously. Some hope was expressed in terms of children being heard when speaking collectively, *"You need to have lots of kids to get people to listen"*. Respondents also reported that they believe they are seen as incapable or too inexperienced -*"people think kids are too young to understand things"* and *"they think we don't know what we're talking about"*.

There was also a view that children have not received due credit for work they have done on environmental issues. Some lamented that it was not recognized that children are capable of having an opinion on these matters. A number of comments recorded referred to children's lack of power when compared with adults - *"adults in positions of power"* and *"adults / parents have control."*

Lack Of Encouragement and Support

Lack of encouragement and support was expressed as a major constraint and was cited by respondents. Low levels of encouragement from authority figures close to children, as in parents and teachers, was seen as a constraint as was the perceived lack of Government support. The lack of practical help on how to do things was voiced as were concerns about insufficient monetary support for environmental projects.

The reported low levels of encouragement from parents, teachers and governments was illustrated by comments like *"government think that it's a waste of time and money"* and *"parents say it's not worth it , no parental support"*.
At a practical level, some group members reported that there is a lack of leadership and insufficient people to help kids with their ideas. Millennium Kids was seen as a source of support but that there was *"not enough organisations like Millennium Kids"*. Not having *"enough money to do what you want to do"* and other monetary constraints were highlighted in six responses.

Disinterest

There were comments that related to the unwillingness of other young people to take responsibility for environmental matters and their overall reluctance to get involved. Some saw disinterest as stemming from a sense of hopelessness because the task was too big and there were not enough people committed:- *"adults not committed to the environment"* and *"environmental commitment is not part of family's values"* and *"there's not enough kids committed to making people listen"*.

Others reported it as someone else's problem but certainly not their, for example. *"it's government's responsibility, not my fault"*. There was also a suggestion of faddishness, in that some people get involved for the short term but then lose interest *"lack of long term commitment, tokenism i.e. plant trees but don't water them"*.

Lack Of Confidence

A low sense of personal empowerment amongst children due to a lack of confidence in their ability to have an impact and to get heard was raise. Some responses included here were similar in content to the lack of credibility items described earlier. Comments registered in this category referred particularly to how respondents see themselves, rather than how they think others perceive them.

Fear of failure or a fear of ridicule, surfaced here - *"adults will just laugh"* and *"scared to ask adults"* and *"don't want to look bad or be wrong"*. *"Young people don't have high enough opinions about themselves"* and a personal disbelief that they are capable enough to make a difference were recurrent responses.

Lack Of Knowledge

Responses related to the lack of knowledge amongst children about environmental issues and any possible solutions as a key constraint inhibiting their involvement in influencing environmental issues. This referred to specific content knowledge of environment issues and way typically expressed as a view that young people can *"see the problem but don't know what to do about it"*. However, from a different perspective, it was noted that *"we don't have the answers, does anyone?"* and a *"lack of environmental awareness within schools"* was also expressed.

Negative Peer Pressure

Negative peer pressure for young people who want to get involved was seen as a constraint in comments made. The comment *"kids get teased because they want to help"* captures the main sentiment reported within this category. *"It's not cool"*, is another expression used to describe the impact of peer pressure when it comes to environmental issues.

Lack Of Opportunity

For those young people with a genuine environmental commitment, competing demands on children's time was deemed to be relevant and was raised as a constraint restricting the involvement of young people on three occasions.

The lack of opportunity to get more involved due to competing demands on children's time is illustrated by the comment, *"school – not a lot of time"*.

There were 85 relevant responses to ideas on roles that might be adopted by young people to influence the environment of the future contributed through a focus group session. Results were subsequently categorised into major themes and formed the basis of five future roles for young people. These roles involved :

- physical participation in environmental projects;
- generating increased awareness within their peer group;
- expressing the voice of young people to people of influence,
- representation on bodies of influence
- acting as a catalyst for influencing environmental education initiatives

Role 1 - Physical Participation In Environmental Improvement Projects

There were 25 recorded suggestions from research participants that referred to children being role models for other children by leading by example. Getting involved and physically participating in environmental improvement projects was the primary vehicle that respondents thought could provide this.

"Young people to go out in the community and lead the way", illustrates the predominant view expressed within this category. Most saw it as a hands-on role, doing things like *"planting trees"*, *"getting in there and cleaning up with yourself and friends"*, *"frog ponds, native fauna projects"*, *"green teams projects"*, *"recycling every night"* and *"water usage, paper usage at school"*.

A sense of community spirit around local projects is a strong element within the responses, *"work together – families, schools and community with something like physical participation in environmental improvements."*

Other ideas included, *"expand(ing) Millennium Kids environmental citizenship programs"*, *"becoming environmental 'problem-solvers' at schools and in communities"*, *"allocat(ing) environmental tasks for students"* and *"organis(ing) fun days to National Park / Forest and go and clean up / plant trees."*

Role 2 - Generating Increased Awareness Amongst Youth

Acting as agents to raise awareness and interest in environmental issues amongst other young people was suggested 18 times. In addition, various strategies and techniques to do this were highlighted as illustrated by the suggestions listed below.

Some suggestions see children active within schools - *"school ambassador programs, take what we learn at Millennium Kids and share it in our schools"*, *"go around to schools and tell them – kids more likely to listen to other kids"* and *"young people to lead environmental issues and awareness at school"*. In particular the role as described sees children taking the lead - *"raising environmental consciousness in the media, at schools, with teachers – taking the lead not just being taught"*.

Other suggestions are focussed on influencing wider audiences - *"have kids presenting programs on television about the environment (TV Alphabeticus)"* and *"kids should be on TV to talk about the environment not adults talking about kids and the environment (Airwatch)."*

And beyond that, some suggestions refer to connections beyond local and state - *"global focus, through the Internet and web pages like Millennium Kids and other organisations"*. *"Kids are comfortable with new technology, use it to make links that work for getting kids' point of view across"* and *"communication with other states and countries"*.

Role 3 - Expressing the Voice of Young People in the Wider Arena

Articulating and representing young people's environmental concerns and ideas to the community, and to people of influence, was mentioned 16 times. As in the category above a number of specific approaches were suggested. All of them, however, relate to a desire to let others know what young people think about environmental issues.

The intent of this role is to *"spread the message of what's important"* and to *"demonstrate that the environment is a priority for children and for the future"*. Some responses refer to ways to increase children's influencing power, *"bigger, stronger when working as a group and more effective with a greater chance of being listened to"* and *"people power via conference of 250 kids means someone will listen to us"*.

The direct approach was also raised, *"write to Shire and ask to protect areas"*, *"approach Shire to make sure we have recycling centres and bins"* and *"ensure a certain area remains as nature, we want to have a say in community reserve development"*.

Role 4 - Youth Representation on Bodies of Influence

Seeking positions as youth representatives on environmental bodies and forums was offered eight times as a desirable future role for young people.

Suggestions for opportunities for this involvement ranged from student bodies to government reference groups *"kids should have a place on community boards for important issues"*, *"student representative on the school council"*, *"local youth parliament"*, *"youth ambassador"* and *"youth council as a part of local council"*.

Role 5 - Influential Role in Environmental Education

There were four suggestions that young people should seek to influence school curricula development towards environmentally focused education. This role is illustrated by comments including *"demand environment-focused education from the government and from the education system"* and *"have a say in what school curriculum involves"*.