



Youth Can (and should) Lead Movements to Support Environmental Work

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Human interaction with the environment is decreasing the quality and viability of life for many. Environmental justice is a youth issue because

Figure 1 Photograph by Helena Lopes:
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/four-person-standing-at-top-of-grassy-mountain-697244/>

environmental degradation is a threat to life-long health & wellbeing. Youth, and especially youth with marginalized identities (i.e. due to their race, gender, socioeconomic class, disability, etc.) face the disproportionate effect of environmental changes. Though youth will be impacted for the rest of their lives by pivotal decisions of current leaders, they have little to no influence on how these environmental changes are addressed.

“[This is] a call to action toward addressing pressing issues of sustainability, health, and social justice through a lens of intergenerational solidarity with a youth empowerment focus.”

Without the power to influence their present and future regarding climate change, youth are at risk of mental health consequences¹. By making the case for “a place at the table,” we

Highlights

Generation-based priorities lead youth to promote environmental sustainability, health, and social justice.

Youth are capable of unique problem-solving and deserving of authority related to environmental sustainability, the built environment, and health, while showing that certain communities are disproportionately impacted by climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss.

can encourage other youth to lead and leverage their unique skill sets. This could lead to a reduced sense of hopelessness and increase mobilization towards solutions.

Our Project

A group of students from universities around the U.S. participated in an Integrated Bioscience and Built Environment Consortium (IBEC) Healthy People, Healthy Planet student intensive and were inspired to express their voices in front of representatives from government, industry, and academia. Specifically, the students who participated are concerned with the planet's health and how its deterioration will impact their lifetimes. A few of the students who participated sought to further share their ideas about how those with influence in the U.S. can address environmental stressors.

Youth collaborators conducted a literature review and interviewed 10 experts in the fields of public health, environmental justice, Indigenous knowledge, and youth empowerment – as well as youth activists themselves. They found that there is an indiscernible relationship between the built and natural environments and that certain communities bear the impact of environmental degradation more than others. They also learned the values and skill sets of youth and the history of youth and influence. They sought to understand the values and skillsets of older (“experienced”) generations, and how they can support powerful intergenerational partnerships and usher youth into influential positions for environmental protection and regeneration.

Call to Action

We ask that SCRA, other community-based research entities, and environmental organizations expand opportunities for students to lead research. In the seven months which we've been working on this project with little administrative guidance, we've identified the barriers to publishing student-led research. We do not have time to wait for students to have degrees to leverage their existing capabilities or value their ideas.

Our work advocates for the skill sets of youth, such as heightened creativity, emotional connection, and media savvy, to be leveraged toward sustainability and regeneration. Industry and non-profits could engage youth to increase innovation and henceforth address ongoing environmental degradation.

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HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

We have a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to address the intersection of social/cultural and environmental issues. We highlight the difficulty youth face in amplifying their ideas outside of activist circles. We advocate for collaborative partnerships across generations to address the inseparable issues of social and environmental justice.

¹ Burke, S., Sanson, A. V., & Van Hoorn, J. (2018). The Psychological Effects of Climate Change on Children. *Current psychiatry reports*, 20(5), 35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-018-0896-9>