

How environmental action can be a powerful tool for youth engagement and education.

ECO-UNESCO's Young Environmentalist Awards ECO-Dens - a youth-led environmental education initiative that fosters leadership, sustainability awareness, and peer learning.

ELAINE NEVIN – NATIONAL DIRECTOR ECO-UNESCO

ETBI CONFERENCE GALWAY – MAY 28TH 2025

WWW.ECOUNESCO.IE



WHO IS ECO-UNESCO?



Youth Education



Environmental
Education/ ESD
& QEI Training Centre



Founded in 1986

First environmental youth organisation set up by
young people, for young people between 10 –
25-years



Empowering young
people to help
protect our
environment.



Proud to be a Sustainable Development Goal
Champion



UNESCO link — affiliated to the
WFUCA, UN DESD, GAP Key Partner and
ESDfor2030 net member

15,000+ young
people annually

How we do what we do

Our programmes

Our approach

Channel young peoples energy,
passion and creativity

Thinking Globally and Acting
Locally

Learning by Doing

Youth Centred



Our programmes



Direct Youth Work – Environmental Youth Programmes

Youth for Sustainable Development, Learning 2 Change Environmental Workshops, Eco-Weeks, Eco-Clubs, ECO-Choices,



Annual Young Environmentalist Awards

The biggest ECO action project in Ireland, inspiring, acknowledging and supporting young people to take environmental action



Training & Upskilling Programmes & Resources

Green Skills Employability, QQI Accredited courses such as Introduction to Sustainable Development (L5), Ecology & Environment (L6); One-day courses, ECO-Academy and Educational resources



ECO-UNESCO – intersection between non-formal and formal

- Work with young people through youth work approach in and out of schools settings
- We promote youth centred and action project work through our range of programmes incl:
 - Young Environmentalist Awards and ECO-Dens
 - **Youth for Sustainable Development programme** – for our out of schools peer education
 - Workshops
 - ECO-UNESCO Clubs



How environmental action can be a powerful tool for youth engagement and education - benefits of environmental action for young people

- Encouraging Active Citizenship
- Learning important skills
- Building confidence
- Team building
- Communications
- Developing critical thinking and empathy
- Engaging with local nature and urban environments
- Improving Health & Well-being
- Helping local communities
- Having youth voices heard
- Engaging with experts and influential adults
- Empowerment through taking action



Case Study – Young Environmentalist Awards ECO-Dens



What is the Young Environmentalist Awards

- **All-Ireland environmental programme** that **recognises and rewards** young people aged 10 – 18 years who **raise environmental awareness and improve their local environment**
- **Builds knowledge, skills and values** for the protection of the natural environment **and young people develop a sense of agency**
- **Promotes action-based learning in young people**, supporting and promoting climate action and the SDG's
- **Proactive, solutions-based approach for young people** to find solutions to environmental problems, with focus on **Action** and **Awareness**;
- **Positive environmental action is carried out in communities** that can have a lasting positive environmental impact; Create links with local community actors



Senior
15-18

Junior
12-14

Super
Junior
10-12

YEA process – 6 Steps to Success Framework

1. Get your team together – young people come together in a group; team building, develop key skills
2. Select an issue and Research – young people decide on an issue of interest or concern to them and identify solutions
3. Develop your plan – young people plan their actions and activities develop planning skills
4. Take Action – young people take action and develop sense of agency and empowerment
5. Raise Awareness – young people highlight project work with others incl. with peers and wider community
6. Reflect – young people reflect on what skills they developed, what they learnt and what they developed personally



YEA process – ECO-Dens

- **ECO-Dens** – Regional judging sessions – held around Ireland
- **Groups of young people present their projects** to a panel of judges and local community leaders and decision makers
- **Group Presentation preparation** – preparatory workshops with all groups on days of ECO- Dens
 - **Environmental games and activities** – provided on ECO-Den day
- **Format - 5 minutes to present followed by** questions and answers
- **Regional judges and experts include** – ETB youth officers, Local authority representatives, University reps



YEA process – ECO-Dens benefits

- **Young peoples voices are amplified** as they get a chance to highlight their issue to decision makers in their community
- Builds confidence in young people
- Help young people feel connected
- **Develop presentation skills, team work** - for many young people this is a favourite part of being involved



YEA process –Showcase

Annual Showcase and Awards –

- Young people have an opportunity to showcase their **actions and project work across Ireland with over 1000 other young people**
- provides an opportunity for young people to share leanings on solutions to issues of concern to them with other young people and a panel of experts visiting projects



Actions link young people in and to communities

- **Projects done in schools and youth groups link to local communities**
 - Groups are encouraged develop links in with their local community
 - outside of their youth group/ schools **including local authorities**
- **Trained leaders and mentors - YEA Mentors around Ireland** – we have adult leaders and teachers who support young people
- **Broad range of approaches used e.g. recognising that young people have different interests and competencies e.g. ECO-Art and Design, ECO-Innovation**
- **Peer to peer learning / education - Young people engaging other young people in awareness** – promoting opportunities for youth leadership and peer education
- **ECO-Dens and Showcase and networking** – providing **inspiration through showcasing of projects.** Solutions focused actions.
- **Recognition, Reward** – providing recognition for the work incl. certificates, Awards Ceremony,



Projects

Seedling Swap

Seniors (15-18)

Biodiversity Category



Plastic outta the park

Senior (15-18)

Waste Category



ME-Bags

Senior (15-18)

ECO-Health & Well-being



Play Your Part

Super Juniors (10-12)

Eco-Innovation Category

Thank You!



www.ecounesco.ie

Contact:

Elaine.Nevin@ecounesco.ie

Telephone: 01 662 5491











Thinking about climate change

When young people were asked how do they feel when thinking about climate change, they feel mostly anxious, sad, angry, fearful but also eager to act.

65%



ANXIOUS

53%



FEARFUL

47%



SAD

37%



ANGRY

37%



EAGER TO ACT



What do young people find helpful when it comes to managing their climate anxiety or eco-anxiety?

Climate anxiety or eco-anxiety can be experienced when people worry about the threats facing the earth as a result of climate change and environmental damage. When asked what is helpful to manage climate or eco-anxiety the majority of young people stated that hearing positive climate news (63%), followed by spending time in nature (47%), learning about solutions to climate change (46%), making changes in lifestyle (39%) and taking part in climate action (35%) were most helpful.

63%

Hearing about positive climate news from around the world

47%

Spending time in nature

46%

Learning about the solutions to climate change

39%

Making changes to my lifestyle and habits to help the environment

35%

Taking part in climate action

27%

Practicing mindfulness

20%

Speaking to others about climate change

19%

Doing something creative through art/poetry/film

8%

I haven't found a way to manage my climate anxiety

7%

I never experience climate anxiety

3%

Other (please specify)

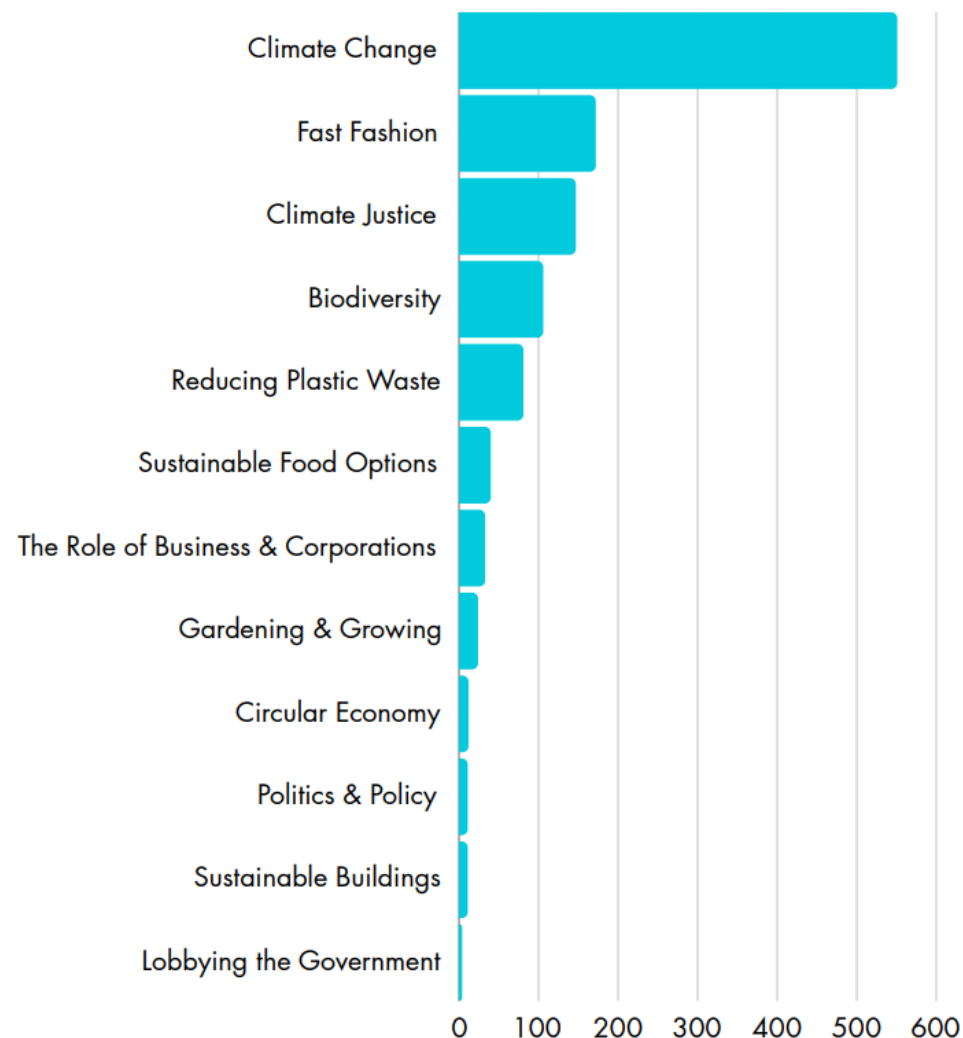
Here is what young people said when they selected 'Other':

"I find when I ignore it makes me less anxious about it. The more I find out the more I get stressed."

"Doing little actions so I know I am doing my part e.g. walking instead of driving/reusing packaging of products that I buy"

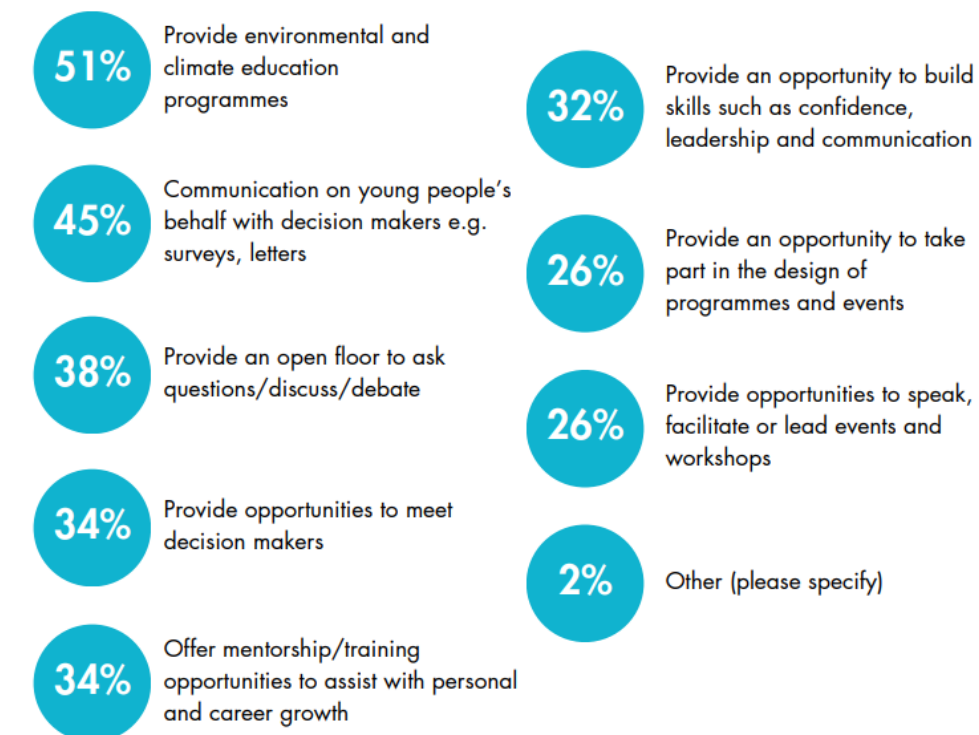
Top areas young people are most knowledgeable about

Young people feel they have the highest level of knowledge on topics of 'Climate Change', 'Fast Fashion', 'Climate Justice', 'Biodiversity' and 'Reducing Plastic Waste'. In contrast, 'Politics and Policy' as well as 'Circular Economy' ranked the lowest.



What can youth organisations like ECO-UNESCO do to support young people in climate action?

Young people were asked what youth organisations like ECO-UNESCO can do and they highlighted the provision of environmental and climate education programmes as their top support. Communication with decision makers on young people's behalf ranked second highest.



Here is what young people said when they selected 'Other':

"Provide more support to rural areas for people who want to get involved"

"Funding for youth led solutions."

"Pressure UN bodies to enforce climate justice, hold UN officials accountable for inactivity"

"Petition and protest companies and government"

"I'd love to learn skills to help me with my climate anxiety. I find it very difficult to calm down when talking about climate change and I never hear any positive news about it."

"Opportunities to restore local habitats and environments."